

**SOCIAL RESISTANCE IN INDIAN BHAKTI MOVEMENT WITH
SPECIAL REFERENCE TO SANT KABIR AND
GURU RAVI DASS**

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CHAPTER-1

INTRODUCTION

The tradition of religious thought in India is incredibly long, complicated and complex. The four *Vedas* are considered to be the primary source of religion and philosophy in Hinduism. However, the simplicity of religion was eclipsed by philosophical development during the *Vedanta* and the Post-Vedic period within the Vedic tradition itself when the *Upanishads*, *Brahma Sutras*, *Bhagvad Gita*, and the *Puranas* were written. The religion underwent a major change during the Puranic period. Various approaches and schools appeared during this period which aimed at seeking *moksha* or deliverance. Of all these approaches it was *Bhakti* that got prominence. The vitality of Indian culture is epitomized in its spirituality, meaning the pursuit of the soul in order to manifest divinity within. Historically, Hindus were free to entertain so many different kinds of religious beliefs and practices that it was not possible to reduce Hinduism to a uniform monolithic religious system which could present an easily recognizable image of this religion.

The medieval period was a time when Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism vied with one another, each claiming superiority over the other, while each in its own turn was torn by its sects. Both Jainism and Buddhism which sought to revitalize the Indian society by offering stiff resistance to ritualism, caste system and Brahmanical hegemony, lost much of their relevance. Hindu religion is regarded as one of the most ancient religions of India and its advocates and supporters formed the largest part of the country, whereas Islam was a foreign religion till the first half of the seventh century. Muslims came in contact with India through Indo-Arabian trade. These traders turned into intruders and pillaged the Indian land to a great extent. They plundered and looted the places of Hindu worship as well as Buddhist monasteries to express their antipathy towards any religion except their own. Ultimately they settled as rulers after ravaging the country again and again.

The advent of a well organized Islamic tradition gave a rough jolt to Indian religious doctrine and social system. It had a profound effect on its political, cultural and socio-religious life in the country in the medieval period. The caste system received a strong blow and the Indian environment got upset. The priestly class got busy in the search for the reason of this tumult and they started making efforts to

support their society and religious doctrine. The high-caste *Kshatriyas* and the Brahmin orthodoxy despised and intensely disliked the intruders and tried to maintain a strict distance from them. They became fanatical and conformed more and more to their long established and accepted beliefs. They became more self-conscious and felt endangered by the impure (*Mlechha*) intruders and their foreign culture. The lower classes among the Hindus underwent double persecution. On one hand was the oppression of the new Islamic rulers and on the other, hand the high caste Hindus imposed caste-based economic and social inequalities. The prevalent Hindu religion, instead of coming to the rescue, only helped the higher orders to perpetuate their social and religious dominion over the lower classes. The Brahmins tried to sustain their high social position by observing strict religious rituals and practices and hence, by following these Brahmins, the society became more and more ritualistic.

On the political front, there was a decline of the centralized state which gave birth to a large number of provincial and regional states in both North and South India. On the economic front, feudal exploitation was growing and the condition of the peasants was getting worse. The expansion of the market system had also created social instability. The social front was characterized by the Brahmins' oppression. Brahmins were practicing complex rites and rituals in order to maintain their status quo. Those who did not fit in to the traditional four *Varnas* were categorized as outcastes. Islam was gaining recognition not only politically but also on the religious front as it was supported by state policies that encouraged large scale conversions among the lower caste Hindus, hounded by the pall of the *Jaziyah* tax.

On the socio-religious scene of medieval India, Hinduism and Islam stood opposite to each other and hardly exchanged any reverence and regard for each other. Hinduism believed in the existence of multiple gods, was highly polytheistic in nature, strictly adhered to idolatry and believed in deific incarnation. Islam, on the other hand, was strictly monotheistic and rejected idol worship, incarnation and transmigration of the soul. Hinduism considered worldly life an obstacle in the path of spiritual salvation and epiphany and strictly endorsed asceticism or repudiation as the ultimate or the only path to salvation. The *Vedas* and the *Puranas* were given the scriptural status and only the Brahmins could perform certain rites. On the other hand, Islam never accepted inequity amidst human beings on the basis of one's birth.

According to egalitarian ideals of Islam, all were equal in the eyes of God but the rigidity in the Hindus was not relaxed and caste distinctions still existed.

Fifteenth century India, the medieval age, was essentially a feudal age. The reigns of the social order were in the hands of the feudal lords. The most powerful advocates of the feudal class were the Brahmins and the *Maulvis*, who befooled the ignorant masses into believing that their miseries were not a consequence of the social exploitation or any economic disparity but the unavoidable result of their past actions. They were also successful in keeping the society divided by advocating a strict adherence to the caste system. The possibility of an integrated society got another jolt when they divided the society into Hindus and Muslims. Consequently, a ground was prepared by the Bhakti movement where the two religions could meet without any radical changes in their beliefs. The Bhakti movement attempted to give fresh lease of life to the decadent religion by reviving the past and attempting to interpret it in the light of new socio-economic forces.

The Hindus recognized two principle incarnations of Vishnu, viz. Krishna and Rama. Some of them regarded Krishna as their supreme God, while others chose Rama as their deity. Both the groups believed in one personal God, who was full of love and pity towards His devotees. Both accepted the doctrine of incarnation and worship. With regards to worshippers of Krishna, there were certain leaders who were contemporary with Kabir. Between 1450 and 1480, Narsimha Mehta, Gujarati poet, wrote lyrics in praise of Radha and Krishna. Vidyapati and Umapati, in the middle of the fifteenth century wrote Krishnaite lyrics in the Maithili dialect of Bihari. Mirabai, a great worshipper of Krishna, flourished about 1470. Vallabhacharya popularized the Krishnaite form of Hinduism during the latter part of the life of Kabir.

Among those who worshipped Rama, it was Ramananda who gave the great impulse to the movement in North India in which Kabir lived. Ramananda preached that God should be worshipped under the name of Rama. He was less strict in matters of social usage than the followers of Ramanuja, though he did not in any way interfere with the privileges of Brahmins. F.E. Keay is of the opinion:

Ramananda's great contribution to the religious life of India was to insist with great vehemence on the absolute value of *bhakti*, or loving faith in a personal God, as the means of obtaining salvation and all spiritual blessings. It was a

religion which appealed to men's hearts, and was, therefore, more popular than the cold intellectualism of many of the Brahmin teachers. (5)

The *bhakti* sects admitted that people from all castes and even the outcastes could also obtain salvation by means of *bhakti*. Ramananda has gone one step further by admitting such persons as *bairagis* or ascetics. His disciples are said to have been Sena, a barber, Dhanna, a *Jat*, Ravi Dass, a *chamar* (a leather worker, an outcaste), Kabir, the Muslim weaver and others. Though Ramananda criticized idolatry but he did not give up the worship of idols. It was left for Kabir to preach a doctrine of theism which would not tolerate polytheism, incarnation, idols or myths.

The *Muhammadan* influence made Ramananda less strict in social usage than other Hindu teachers before him and it was certainly this influence, which one could find in great extent in the teachings of Kabir. Living side by side for centuries in India, Hindus and Muslims had learned to cooperate and tolerate each other. Many Muslims in high positions, in those days, were converts from Hinduism and carried over many of their old ideas with them to the new faith. The pantheistic thought of Hinduism found many points of contact with the teaching of Sufism. The Sufis were teaching doctrines which were very similar to those of Hindu teachers. It is evident to a certain extent that Muslim and Hindu ideas had been brought into contact and they mutually influenced each other and extended the Bhakti movement.

The destruction of the Hindu schools and shrines and Buddhist monasteries and the scattering of their scholars by Muslim rulers gave a serious setback to Sanskrit scholarship. There was a development of vernacular literature. The followers of Ramanuja largely used Sanskrit for their religious literature, but they also used the vernacular. Ramananda and his followers practically gave up the use of Sanskrit for Bhakti and devotional literature and used the regional language so that they could reach the masses.

The Bhakti movement in its various forms was making great headway and was inspiring many to write devotional verses. The Bhakti as religious movement appealed to the hearts of men and offered them consolation amidst the troubles of life in the favour of God who cared for them and could be approached by all. Such were the weave and thread of society when Sant Kabir and Guru Ravi Dass came to the scene. Not only had they recorded the factual statements of social disparities and

social evils in their poetry, but had also attempted to strike awareness in the masses for the eradication of these vices. Lord Buddha also revolted against the domination of the Brahmins but that revolt was of an upper class against the upper class whereas the revolt of Sant Kabir and Guru Ravi Dasss was a revolt of the lower caste against the upper caste. By preaching that all men were equal before God, they supported that section of masses, which was the most oppressed under Brahmanical domination.

The saint-poets, being liberal and more open to the faith of other men by their nature, attempted a sympathetic understanding of each other's faith. They were not only free from the orthodoxy of their respective traditions, but were also critical of the religious exclusivism of those traditions. The critical attitude of these free thinking saint-poets helped in the cultivation of a spirit of reform in the society.

The religious and the cultural milieu in which the *Sant* tradition evolved was totally different from the one in which *Vaishnava bhakti* emerged. It is commonly believed that the *Sant* tradition was a later phase of *Vaishnava bhakti* because of its emphasis on love as the essential religious response. But, as the fact shows the *Sant* tradition was not merely a later phase but a new movement that tended to reject or replace some of the essential features of *Vaishnava bhakti* of the South. Unlike the *Vaishnava bhaktas*, the love of the *Sants* was directed not towards one of the *avatars* of Vishnu, but towards the Formless One. They expressed their love not by means of the ceremonial practices, but through strictly inward meditation on the divine *Nama* and through inner devotion to God. The practice of image worship was regarded as irrelevant by the *Sants*. They severely criticized the institutions of priesthood and stratification of society into various grades on the basis of birth. Instead of observing the elaborated ritual practices, they emphasized on interior devotion and ethical life. The doctrine of incarnation of God was also overthrown by the doctrine of all-prevailing indwelling supreme God. Similarly the *Sants* did not acknowledge any external religious authority. Instead their religious experience was the highest authority for them.

The *Sants* often used *Natha* terminology and their concepts such as *sahaja*, *sabada*, *surati* etc. but gave them a theistic content. "They owed a great debt to the *Nathas* also for their rejection of exterior forms, ceremonies, caste distinctions, sacred languages and scriptures, for the strong emphasis upon unity as opposed to duality,

and for the concept of mystical union which destroys this duality.” (McLeod 153) The *Sants* also derived several important elements from Sufis. Their rejection of idol worship, of the doctrine of *avtara* and of social and religious inequalities was basically due to the influence of Islam. Assimilating elements from all these traditions, the *Sant* tradition evolved as a distinct religious movement with distinct characteristic features. Although it borrowed several elements from the existing liberal religious movements, it was not simply a synthesis of these elements, because the personal experience of the *Sants* was central to the whole of the movement.

The *Sant Parampara* or the *Nirgun Sampardaya* are the names given to the religious movement which was represented by Kabir, Ravi Dass, and other saints who flourished in the later medieval centuries in Northern India. Their philosophy is called *Sant Mat*, meaning ‘point of view of the Saints’. They cast aside the burden of rituals and subtleties of philosophies in favour of expression of intense love for God in vernacular language. Their teachings are characterized by “egalitarianism opposed to the qualitative distinctions of the Hindu caste system, and to those between Hindus and Muslims.” (Woodhead 71) The ideological unity of the Bhakti Saints is also evident from their independence from, and rejection of, the dominant and elitist religions of the time – Brahmanism and orthodox Islam.

The resistant movement led by these Bhakti Saints was predominantly a protest of the downtrodden segments (i.e. the lower castes and classes) at disseminating the social order enforced by the Brahmins. The Bhakti Saints declared that God resides in every individual and one can reach Him by means of faith. Thus, the Saint Poets were able to bring religion to the impoverished and unprivileged segments of the society. Their belief in the true religion took them away from the feigned beliefs and orthodox practices of the Brahmins and they motivated common masses to have belief in the divine grace. Their *bhakti* manifested resistance to the meaningless rituals, superstitions and social inequalities caused by the caste system. The best contribution of *bhakti* was that it had pulled down all those evil and divisive barriers of caste, creed, race and color. *Bhakti* acted as a social critique and became a strong basis for the marginalized segments of the lower castes to raise their voice against social inequities based on the caste system authorized by *Vedas* and *Puranas*. The saint-poets through their poetry set distinguishable paradigms of castelessness and propagated the message of universal brotherhood and persuaded people to discard

formal rituals and superstitions. The Bhakti Saints through their poetic protest provided the *Shudras* and outcastes with a method to attain salvation. The saint-poets gave the common people a vision of an egalitarian society in which there was no hierarchy of different castes and all people were treated with same respect as here they were all equal and could co-exist with love and affection. Further, in this society, there was no need for the people to carry the burden of rituals and ceremonies which were imposed on them by the Brahmanic system.

Being an amalgam of large number of devotional movements, Bhakti movement is also regarded as a religious drive opposing the caste based discrimination and idolatry. The saint-poets questioned the conformist and despotic comprehension of the Hindu religion and thus created a possibility for the deprived, marginalized and the low caste people to believe that they could attain salvation through love and dedication to their own God and that the knowledge of the scriptures was not a pre-requisite for the purpose. The poetry of these Bhakti Poets shows spiritual as well as social resistance against the established orthodox Brahmanical institutions of religion. They gave respectability to the marginalized and the deprived classes, by posing a challenge to the caste hegemony and elites of the society. Since their poetry has been a scathing comment on the socio-religious ideological inconsistencies of that period, they also contain a vision for a new society. Their poetry started an undeviating trend of resistance amid the low caste people. It enthused them with a lot of courage and boldness so as to be able to give expression to their resistance against orthodox unjust practices, despotism and hegemony they had been going through for centuries. Even today, the poetry of these Bhakti Saints inspires not only Indians but the people all over the world who are fighting against injustice and inequality.

The Saints made no tall demands on the common man. They spoke of a religion of love, of a God who resided in the temple of a heart. “Such an arrangement was very convenient and desirable during the times when political instability, forced conversions and violence of all sorts, were rampant. The emotional appeal, spiritual richness of the experience, the simplification of the divine, the rhythm and joy of community-singing (*bhajan-kirtan*), which elevated and refined the individual through great poetry and also provided therapeutic release, provided the people with a life line to hold on to, in the suffering darkness that had otherwise ravaged them.”

(Sadrangani 95)

The Bhakti leaders across India were imbued with the spirit of universal brotherhood and social radicalism. They were aware of the fact that true religion had lost its glory in artificial and ostentatious practices and caste assertiveness. They emphasized divine devotion and humanism and strived hard to build a liberal and empathetic religion. They were highly concerned and sympathetic towards the plight of the common people and always made efforts for social justice. They believed that religion always inspired hard labour and virtuous life and had no relation with the escapism of a world renouncing recluse. Most importantly, these Bhakti leaders never prescribed that salvation could be attained by denouncing normal worldly life. They set examples for the common people with their own lives of productivity and creativity. The saint- poets were married and worked hard to earn their livelihood – Kabir was a weaver by profession and Ravi Dass was a shoemaker. They did not follow their gurus as they recognized the value of labour which they connected with social service and laid emphasis on the spiritual value of every kind of labour. They strongly disapproved austerity, resignation and abstinence to acquire spiritual insight.

Caste was the main target of these bhakti leaders. It was to them what the Church, the symbol of organized and degenerated Christianity, was to the eighteenth century French philosopher Voltaire. Those who attacked caste as wrong, inhuman, and futile announced their arrival on the scene. The discontent of Bhakti Saints against the contemporary social set-up and Brahmins' upper caste is quite perceptible in their verses. The saint-poets through their sincere efforts protested against the authority of the ruling class. They renounced the social structure based on caste system and voiced their protest against untouchability, considering *Shudras* as subalterns and keeping them deprived of their knowledge.

In a dramatic development, the cultural religious leadership shifted from the Brahmin priests well versed in *Karmakanda* and Sanskrit scriptures to those who composed verses in their own idiom. Energized by fresh leadership and new ideas, Bhakti became a campaign for socio-cultural change. Writing in 1900, M.G. Ranade saw it as a popular movement of historic importance:

...like the Protestant Reformation in Europe in the sixteenth century, there was a Religious, Social and Literary Revival and reformation in

India. This... was not Brahmanical in its orthodoxy, it was heterodox in its spirit of protest against forms and ceremonies and class distinctions based on birth, and ethical in its preference of a pure heart, and of the law of love, to all other acquired merits and good works. This was the work of the people, of the masses, and not of the classes. As its heads were saints and Prophets, Poets and Philosophers, who sprang chiefly from the lower orders of society-tailors, carpenters, potters, gardeners, shopkeepers, barbers, and even *mahars*. (cited in Zelliot 8-9)

The Bhakti Saints addressed the twin challenges prevalent in the society – Brahmanical religious oppression and the spiritual crisis forced on the Indian polity by the Semitic religion Islam, which on the face of it had irreconcilable differences with Hinduism. The saint-poets' solution to the problem took two distinct shapes, viz. resistance to arbitrary and unbridled religious and secular authority, and reconciliation of the differences between the two faiths – Islam and Hinduism. “As part of their resistance to the Brahmanical religious authority, they democratized spirituality by preaching that everybody should have free and direct access to God and that iconic representation of the divine , ritualistic religious practices and caste distinctions are irrelevant to the attainment of a heightened state of spiritual consciousness.” (Mittapalli 196)

The Bhakti Movement in medieval northern India started as a protest against religious orthodoxy. The nature and scope of the movement was almost the same as that of Sufism. But, whereas Sufism did not go against Islam, Quran and Prophet, the Bhakti as particularly those of *Nirguna* School, emerged as a reaction against Hinduism and Brahmanism. It was, in fact, due to the long term socio-religious bias and humiliation faced by the people of lower strata that spiritual leaders of this class not only challenged the religious system of traditional Hinduism but also took the leadership in their own hands and broke the religious monopoly of the Brahmins.

The idea of renunciation in Saint Poetry is in direct contrast to the priestly upper classes. The saint-poets did not give up their family and caste, as labourers and householders, and they dedicated themselves to God. Despite the fact that their manual and physical work was polluting in the eyes of Brahmins, the saints

maintained that all work is worship. Every type of labour, from shoe-making to cloth-weaving and to harvesting crops can be a kind of meditation and offering to God. Saint poetry is based on their everyday experience, and to see this as sacred is in itself a protest against the caste system. Although the Brahmins were totally dependent on the working classes, because they themselves did very little physical labour, they claimed a right to be treated like Gods by the labourers. The Saints countered this by insisting on detachment from the world controlled by the upper strata. Despite their involvement in the household activities, they remained detached from property and everyday relations of society. The saint-poets resisted against fasting or undertaking other kinds of ritual austerities as their whole life was spent fasting because of poverty. Yet their poverty became the very source of their power. They were able to understand the conditions and expressed them through the message of their poetry. This is how they were able to resist the meanings placed on them by the established order. Demanding labour from everyone, they contended that though the world was afflicted by poverty, ignorance, sorrows and miseries could be overcome by work and a virtuous life. This was in direct contrast to the parasitism of the major figures of the priestly culture who shunned physical work in the belief that chanting magic mantras alone was the panacea for all the ills besetting the individual and society.

In medieval India, the upper castes controlled education and thus made it impossible for common people to record their moods and ideas. The people from the lower castes were known as *Shudras* or *mlechha* and were barred from reading scriptures. The culture of medieval India got finally established and dominated by the thoughts and ideas of the so called elites. Brahmins enjoyed the privilege of presiding over all the rituals. As the people from the lower castes could not access the *Vedas* and the *Puranas*, they could never decipher the actual meaning of the scriptures for themselves. The *Puranas* were read out to them by the Brahmins and they explained the content and the meaning of the scriptures in their own way. They dictated and explained all the social standards and punishments for violating the *Vedas* the way they liked. Sanskrit enjoyed a prime status as the language of scriptures as it had been the only written language since ages. The scriptures written in Sanskrit language still dominated and were in official and professional control of a very small group of elites who had monopolized education. Despite sincere efforts of Bhakti Saints in developing vernacular literature, the monopoly of Sanskrit as a privileged language

could not be broken as it was considered the sacred language which only could generate faith and salvation. Along with this, Sanskrit was also called as *devabhasha*, the only medium through which God could be addressed.

The saint-poets through their poetic protest evoked a sense of equality and human dignity by breaking down the age old traditions. They were strongly against the supremacy of Sanskrit as the language of intellectuals and to break its hegemony, they started creating a parallel literature in the local language. They chose to write in *Prakrit* and the regional languages to convey their meaning to all and sundry. They broke away from the superstitions performed by the Brahmins and preached that God could be attained through true love and devotion in mind and heart in their own language also. They criticized all the impositions, inflicting demands of religion and the formal practices that the Brahmins insisted upon to achieve God. The Bhakti Saints not only worked for the upliftment of the downtrodden in the common language of the people but also commended equity between high and low and propagated *bhakti* as a true devotion for their individual God. Thus, Bhakti Movement proved to be a powerful force which gave a definite shape and discernible countenance to the abstract ideas scribbled in the scriptures written in Sanskrit language. As a counter culture, the Bhakti accepted people from different strata irrespective of their caste, colour creed or gender. It added an inclusive dimension to the hitherto privileged, exclusivist, *Upanishadic* tradition.

The saint-poets of medieval bhakti came from the different regions and with different backgrounds having their own individual talent but they shared the common features irrespective of their language. Bhakti Saints, belonging to different classes, were not restricted or bound to any language. They acquainted the common people with their own folk religion which had been ignored so far in holy books. Oral tradition of Bhakti Movement made it possible for the common people to express unmediatedly without requiring any further reference. The change in the language of poetry was partly conditioned by the new conception of the Godhead. In religious poetry, the form and diction are determined by the relation between the deity and the devotee as well as the form of worship chosen by the devotee. The religious poetry of medieval bhakti poets is poetry of experience rather than of thought and the deity whom the poet celebrated had always assumed an intimate form.

The songs written by Bhakti Saints were intensely personal and short. One of the reasons of the predominance of short verses in the medieval period was that of close relation between music and poetry. Verses were not written for recitation only but were primarily meant to be sung. The Bhakti Poets wanted to capture the intensity and the beauty of each moment of their realization and experience of the divine. They found the short verse to be most convenient form to celebrate the glory of God. The Bhakti Poets had discovered a new language, a new idiom and a new verse form to suit their emotional needs. Most of the Bhakti poets composed their verses in the regional languages, sometimes in the particular dialect of these languages such as *Avadhi* and *Braj*, so that the tyranny of Sanskrit was broken on one hand and spiritual knowledge became easily accessible to common people on the other hand. The Bhakti Poets also translated Sanskrit works in regional languages to make them understandable to a wider audience. Kabir, through his inspired poetical utterances, presented to the people the best of the spiritual wisdom contained in Islam and Hinduism, firmly refusing to see them apart. So, the works of these saint-poets illustrated the reform tendencies that were perceptible in every part of the country in the regional languages like Hindi, Bengali and Tamil.

The saint-poets developed literary forums in the language of the common people that emphasize the power of narrative to inspire social transformation. Saint literature in India is generally regarded as a major voice of protest or as a resistance literature as these saint-poets focused their efforts to bring to light different aspects of realities in the life of low caste people. On one hand, Saint Literature tries to present realistically the materialistic, social and emotional conditions of downtrodden people in medieval times. On the other hand, it presents the ideology of the saint-poets to liberate *Shudras* from an inflicted sense of being inferior.

Another important form of protest was the verses that highlighted the greatness of the lower-caste professions. The saint-poets uplifted the vocabulary of labour to the heights of poetic language and even to the height of spiritual philosophy. Kabir, for example, used the language of weavers, frequently employing words like *julaha* (weaver), *tana* (wrap), *bana* (woof), *sut* (thread), *charkha* (spinning wheel), etc. That the vocabulary of cloth weaving could be used to convey a religious message was a new and radical idea. Similarly, Ravi Dass used the vocabulary of a cobbler in his verses like *chamratha* (cobbler), *aar* (awl), *topau* (stitch), *rambi*

(chisel), *ganth* (knots) etc.

This project aims to study the tradition of protest and dissent which culminated in the *Sant Mat* of medieval times with special reference to Sant Kabir and Guru Ravi Dass. These Bhakti Saints strongly upheld the concept of transcendent, immanent and monotheistic God. Here, it may be emphasized that the God of the Bhakti Saints was inner personalized Being different from the transcendent God of the Brahmins. ‘Look within to realize God and decide what is right and wrong for you and others’ was their common refrain. This research project has studied the poetics of resistance of Sant Kabir and Guru Ravi Dass. I have tried to explore how the *bani* of these *Sants* shows spiritual as well as social resistance against the established orthodox Brahmanical, cultural and social institutions and tries to decentralize them. These *Sants* through their preaching gave respect to the marginalized and deprived classes by posing a challenge to the caste hegemony and elites of the society. The thesis also gives insights on how their poetry has been a scathing comment on the socio-religious ideological inconsistencies of that period and also contains a vision for a new society. The research project also elucidates how the poetry of these two *Sants* inspired and motivated the whole world that is fighting against injustice and inequality and how they have massive appeal among the people of different religions. I have also tried to focus on how these poets respond through their common language, metaphors and images taken from the daily routine to show the prevalent practices of their period. The essence of their poetry is a reminder to us that the spiritual-moral part of religion has been undermined in current times. The inclusive humane nature of these traditions needs to be upheld and the divisive-exclusive version of religion has to be ignored for humanity to progress.

Bhakti tradition in India is a well researched area. However, very little research work has been done on the poetry of Sant Kabir and Guru Ravi Dass. To my mind, the focus of the work so far done has been limited to either theoretical study or the study confined to particular age these poets belonged to. The project however re-reads the texts of Sant Kabir and Guru Ravi Dass from a Western critical perspective to focus how ideologically relevant their work is in the present times when new structures of hegemony and oppression have emerged and need to be demolished. The body of poetical work ascribed to Sant Kabir and Guru Ravi Dass is large and varied. There has been much debate and controversy about the authenticity of the various

verses. However, these verses are utterances of the visionaries, rather than literary compositions. The poetry of Sant Kabir and Guru Ravi Dass has also been recorded and compiled in Guru Granth Sahib. The poetry of these *Sants* has been translated into various languages. With the translations I have retained the originals as well. For the convenience of my study, I have divided the literature into two categories, viz. the primary sources and the secondary sources. In the category of primary sources, all works attributed to Sant Kabir and Guru Ravi Dass are included. Apart from the original *bani* in Hindi or Punjabi, I have relied on the English translations made by eminent scholars to understand and analyze the Poetry of these Saint Poets. For the English translation of Sant Kabir I have relied on *The Bijak* by Ahmad Shah, *A Weaver named Kabir: Selected Verses* by Charlotte Vaudeville, *The Bijak of Kabir* by Linda Hess and Sukhdev Singh, *The Weaver's Song* by Vijay Dharwadekar, *Songs of Kabir from Adi Granth* by Nirmal Dass, *Songs of Saints of India* by John Stratton Hawley and Mark Juergensmeyer, *Songs of Kabir* by Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, *Couplets from Kabir (Kabir Dohe)* by G.N. Das, *One Hundred Poems of Kabir* by Rabinderanath Tagore and *Selected Couplets from Sakhi in Tranversion* by Mohan Singh Karki. Out of the several English translations of the hymns of Ravi Dass, I have quoted from *The Sikh Religion: Its Gurus, Sacred Writings and Authors* by M. A. Macauliffe, *Songs of Ravi Dass* by Brij Mohan Sagar, *The Philosopher's Stone* by K.N. Upadhyaya, *Songs of Saints of India* by John Stratton Hawley and Mark Juergensmeyer, *Amritbani Satguru Ravi Dass Maharaj Ji ki(Steek)* by Sant Surinder Singh Bawa and *Life and works of Ravidas* by Winand Calleweart.

All the remaining works are put in the category of secondary sources. Apart from this, a critical study of Kabir *bani* and Guru Ravi Dass *bani* compiled in Guru Granth Sahib has proved quite helpful in understanding the socio-cultural ethos of those times. The relevance of Kabir and Ravi Dass was not for their own period but for all ages to come. Whatever they said or practiced in their times to uplift the society is still demanding in the modern age. That is why it has compelled me to take research on the relevance of resistance to establish the contemporary theoretical framework of Western writers and Indian medieval bhakti Poets. This dissertation will disseminate the concept of resistance in Sant Kabir and Guru Ravi Dass with a new fervor and enthusiasm.

The focus of the research project is on the specific study of the social resistance in Sant Kabir and Guru Ravi Dass *bani*. After studying the *bani* of these two Sants I have divided the thesis in to five chapters.

The second chapter entitled “*Unrest and Resistatance: Historical and Scocial Background*” has been divided in to two parts. The first part is devoted to the study of the development and transformation of the Bhakti movement from the early eighth century to the fourteenth century, up to the emergence of the *Nirguna* school of North India. The chapter relates to the various factors responsible for the growth of Bhakti movement in North India. Bhakti movement originated in South India with three major sects, viz. *Vaishnavas*, Shaivas and the *Shaktas*. The Alwars and Nayanars brought great religious revival in southern India and their poetry form the basis of Tamil culture and Tamil literature. Their poetry became a major movement against Brahmanical domination and spread to other parts of Indian regions. The *Acharya Parampara* combined *Gyan*, *Karma* and *Bhakti* for the realization of God. Sankaracharya’s *Advaitavedanta*, Ramanuja’s *Vishishtadvaita*, Madhvacharya’s *Dvaita Vedanta*, Vallabhacharya’s *Suddhadvaita* and *Dvaitadvaita Vedanta* of Nimbarka have made great contribution to understand the basic philosophy of Hindu religion. A reference has also been made to the female bhakti poets who denounced the ideas expressed in *Manusmriti*. The Shavite ascetics and Nath Yogis also contributed in spreading the Bhakti movement in North India by initiating the members of all castes. Nathpanthis under the leadership of Gorakhnath tried to set up their centres in different parts of North and Western India. Such socio-religious forces provided a favourable atmosphere for the Bhakti movement to take roots in all parts of the country. A discussion has also been made on the basic differences between South Indian and North Indian Bhakti movement. An attempt has been made to discuss various changes that were taking place on the political, economic, social and religious level. Bhakti travelled to North India through the teachings of Ramanuja’s disciple Ramananda who accepted disciples from all sections of society irrespective of their caste. In North India, Bhakti movement illuminated in *Saguna* and *Nirguna* forms of worship. An attempt has been made on the theological differences between *Saguna* and *Nirguna* modes of worship led by Chaitnaya, Tulsidas, Surdas, Mirabai etc. and Kabir, Nanak, Ravi Dass and Dadu etc. respectively.

The second part of the chapter deals with the concept of resistance put forward by many scholars and thinkers. My methodological approach incorporates a number of readings and research strategies borrowed from a variety of disciplines. The project adopts a socio-cultural, historical and ideological approach for analyzing the poetry of Sant Kabir and Guru Ravi Dass. The concept of social resistance in Western tradition has been discussed in literary theories and criticism through Marxists and New Marxists. The ideological and subversive power of literature asserted by Cultural Marxist, Raymond Williams has been used to analyze the resistance shown through the poetry of Bhakti Poets. I have also tried to study the Bhakti poetry of these saint-poets through the lens of Gramsci's concept of the role and importance of ideological struggle and his notion of hegemony. This work will show how the counter-hegemonic resistance has been a fortified base to understand Bhakti poetry. Critical insights have also been incorporated from Althusser's concept of ideology and functioning of state machinery. Apart from these, I have also tried to use the framework developed by the writers and thinkers like Usha Bande, Barbara Harlow and James Scott who have written about the sense of resistance in their works.

The third chapter entitled "*Jatti Na Puchho Saadhu Ki: Kabir Bani*" is confined to forms of social resistance in the poetry of Kabir. To understand Kabir's resistance, I have studied him in historical and sociological context. Kabir lived in a century where there was much political chaos on account of the weakness of the Sultanate of Delhi. The conquering Muslims destroyed the plausible structure of Hinduism and the reality of Hindu world based on it began to disintegrate with terrifying rapidity. According to the tradition, Kabir was brought up and lived in Benaras, a town where he could feel all the influences to the fullest degree. The chapter delineates brief biographical details pertaining to his birth, parentage and his initiation by Ramananda. As an unlettered, low caste weaver, Kabir received none of the formal knowledge of Hindu and Muslim scriptures. Kabir declared himself as child of Ram and Allah and refused to be identified with any of the two religions. Seen in this historical context, I have discussed that the basic vision and agenda of Kabir was human rights, human dignity and liberation from the ritualism and ascriptive ideology. The chapter consists of a detailed discussion on how Kabir reacts vehemently against all cultural and social fossils in the form of direct statements. Through the textual verses, I have tried to establish him resisting the superstitions and

meaningless rituals of orthodox Hindus and hollow pride and intolerant prejudices of orthodox Islam. In the brilliant spotlight of Kabir's vision, anyone or anything that darkened the face of truth stood exposed. The chapter also throws light on Kabir's poetic protest against the attitude of Brahmins towards the *Shudras* and other low castes in keeping them insecure, degraded and oppressed by aligning social status to birth instead of *karma*. Sant Kabir's resistance against Brahmanical *Karmakanda*, cultural values of established Indian society and cultural and social institutions has been discussed in detail through his textual verses. Kabir bani has been used as an alternative model of socio-religious values to discuss his humanistic spiritualism, his plural dialogue against Indian monolithic structure and his concept of one God. Sant Kabir has always been considered as a great social reformer whose vehement criticism of Brahmanic practices, caste-based discrimination and apartheid have always attracted, influenced and comforted the intellectuals not only in India but all over the world.

The forth chapter entitled "*Ekae Maati Ke Sab Bhandhe: Ravi Dass Bani*" deals with the resistance in Guru Ravi Dass bani. As already discussed in the earlier chapter, religion in medieval India had come to be equated with outward performances and ritualistic activities only. The present chapter throws light on the life history of Guru Ravi Dass in brief. Brought up in an ordinary cobbler family, he was never initiated in to traditional learning. Always absorbed in the devotion of God, Guru Ravi Dass was contented with his position and possession. The hagiographical details and accounts of the life of Guru Ravi Dass have important implication for understanding the nature of power and dominance at various levels. The didactic poetry of Guru Ravi Dass and the stories of his life are suffused with various conflicts and counter-hegemonic designs. The chapter highlights various forms of dissent, resistance and political perception in religious terms. The chapter gives insights on the vision of utopian ideologies in the form of *Begumpura* and negates the existing patterns of exploitation and subordination by overturning social and political hierarchies. It is evident from the textual verses of Guru Ravi Dass that his songs and hymns are full of humility and devotion. He did not directly attack the upper classes but made an attempt to enhance the dignity and uplift the standard of the people belonging to the lower strata of society in such a manner that the high caste people came to realize and recognize the hollowness of their claims to superiority. By his

realistic and practical approach, Guru Ravi Dass gave a novel outlook to the people of the country towards the low castes and disgraceful profession. The name of Guru Ravi Dass is the light that guides people out of slavery and suffering to the attainment of liberation at religious and social level. To the many followers, their worship of Ravi Dass is not just a religious phenomena but a vehicle of social, religious and cultural protest against the inequitable distribution of power and wealth in a social order.

The concluding chapter talks about the synthesis of the study and appreciation of the contribution of the two Bhakti Saints towards the life and thought of India. Sant Kabir and Guru Ravi Dass were revolutionary poets who thought ahead of their times and gave a tough resistance to the hegemonic institutions and orthodox values of their times. They fought for the downtrodden, deprived and marginalized sections of the society and gave them identity of their own. Their approach was humanistic and spread a feeling of brotherhood by breaking boundaries and spaces literally and metaphorically. The resistance these poets offered in their poetry is still relevant in the present times in social reform movements. The Bhakti Poets were really futurists and visionary as they gave the concept of one God and protested against the hierarchical institutions when nobody even thought of resistance. The harsh reality that the domination and subordination remained intact did not prevent the *Sants* from offering cultural and symbolic resistance to dominant groups.

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CHAPTER-2

UNREST AND RESISTANCE: HISTORICAL AND SOCIAL BACKGROUND

Bhakti, an expression of pristine love for the Almighty, as a concept is very ancient in Indian religion dating back to the Vedic period. It has been an inalienable part of the cultural and religious set-up of India. In the earlier period, Vedic *mantras* and rituals were considered to be quite important as the mode of devotion. People desirous of health, wealth and prosperity were to please the power of nature by performing holy rites and sacrifices and the deities granted boons to the worshippers. In the later period, recitation of the *mantras* was replaced to a great extent by passionate worshipping of the Almighty in the form of *Upasana* or *Bhajna*. It was *Sraddha* or reverential dedication to God which constituted the basis of the concept of Bhakti tradition. The Bhakti tradition became an important instrument in the transition of the Hindu religion from polytheism to monotheism, as in this tradition intensive and extensive faith in single God was a must. The concept of one Supreme God manifested in many and the idea of this God, known by different names began to take shape. While the philosophical schools of thought were confined to the elite, *Bhakti* had come to define a way of life for a vast number of people residing in India. *Bhakti*, of various ways of reaching God, was an easier and simple approach as in this method there were no mediators and one could reach God directly. This method made it possible for the devotees to worship a personalized version of God without the mediation of Brahmins or any other mediator superior to themselves. This feature of the Bhakti cult made it well received among the common people belonging to all strata of the society for whom, before this, deliverance or *moksha* was a far cry, almost inaccessible and absolutely so without the help of Brahmins.

The Bhakti tradition in India is as old as the singing of hymns is. It was there even during the Vedic period. Since then, it kept growing and finally was in full bloom during the medieval period. From being a common term, it came to be a specialized one as it became a full-fledged cult of Hinduism. The word 'Bhakti' in itself meant faith, love, affection, respect, reverence and dedication. As K. S. Narayanachar defines, "Bhakti, according to the highest traditions of philosophical and religious thought in India, is living for God, and living in God, in thought, feeling

and deed.” (17) According to the current prevailing views, the ‘Bhakti cult’, now has acquired the sense of worshipping and loving a personal God, but all the while being fully aware of the distinction between *Brahma*, the Creator and *Jiva*, the creature. The Bhakti movement disseminated the idea that God lived in every human being and it was possible to attain Him by way of faith and dedication. The main contribution of the movement was that it brought God within the reach of all sections of people. According to Ramanujan, “The main contribution of *Bhakti* lies in bringing the high to the low, esoteric paradox to the man in the street, transmuting ancient and abstruse ideas in the live contemporary experiences, at the same time, finding everyday symbols for the timeless.” (39) In words of Patton Burchett:

“Bhakti has often been praised as form of religion based on loving devotion that transcends social class, caste, and gender...the history of bhakti has generally been told in terms of “the *bhakti* movement”, a single coherent “wave” of devotional sentiment and egalitarian social reform that spread across the entire Indian subcontinent...While the notion of *bhakti* as an egalitarian, democratizing and revolutionary force uniting the Indian nation is a rather recent one, the idea that devotion is the true path to salvation is far more time- tested. That the devotional love for God, just like God’s love for the devotee, transcends distinctions of birth and social class is a message as old as *bhakti* itself. (115)

The Bhakti movement, it is generally accepted, originated in the Southern India. There were three major sects in the South, namely, Vaishnavites the worshippers of *Vishnu*, Shaivites the disciples of *Shiva* and the *Saktas* or the followers of *Shakti*. It was the *Vaishnava* Saints, *Alvars* and the *Shaiva* Saints, *Nayanars* who made the doctrine of *Bhakti* popular among their followers in the South between the seventh and the tenth century against the backdrop of religious tensions between the orthodox sects and the heterodox sects (viz. the Jains and the Buddhists) which explained the organized and political character of *Bhakti* and the social concern. “By the seventh century there was a great religious revival in every part of South India with the two-fold intention of eradicating the influence of popular creeds of Buddhism and Jains on one hand and to popularize the new mode of salvation against the monopoly of Brahmins. The emphasis now shifted to the devotion and the use of *mantras* for purification. It was emphasized that these two aspects were accessible to

all and could be used by the lowly and the unlearned to gain salvation. All that one needed was to seek refuge in God, worship him and gain relief.” (Hopkins 117) This new concept of *Bhakti* brought religion closer to the masses.

The coming of the *Acharyas* started a new epoch in the history of Sri-Vaishnavism. The *Acharya Parampara* seemed to have started in the first half of the ninth century. The *Acharyas* were learned in Sanskrit as well Tamil and they tried to interpret the *Vedas* and the *Upanishads* in terms of Tamil *Prabandhams*. They combined the *Gyan* and *Karma* with *Bhakti* for realizing God. All the *Acharyas* were orthodox Brahmins who discharged their duties strictly. They encouraged the study of the *Vedas*, performance of rituals and other temple festivals but at the same time also introduced the study of the recitation of the hymns of *Alwars* in public and private worship. The *Acharyas* followed the inspirational teachings of *Alwars* and yet they differed from them. The *Alwars* thought that the grace of God was spontaneous and did not depend on merits of the devotee. The *Acharyas*, however, preached that God was free in extending His mercy as a reward for the meritorious actions of the devotee.

Sankaracharya played a very important role in reviving the Hindu religion at a time when Buddhism was gaining dominance over Hinduism. *Bhakti* in the medieval context was generally acknowledged as an antithesis of Sankara’s *Advaita Vedanta* and his advocacy of *jnana* (knowledge). Even the knowledge of the scriptures lost its importance for Sankara when he spoke of *jnana* as a personal spiritual experience. According to Sankaracharya, only the knowledge and realization of the self could lead to the ultimate knowledge.

Ramanuja is regarded as the early exponent of the *Bhakti* movement. By refuting *mayavada* of Sankaracharya, he put forward the philosophy of *Vishishtadvaita*, according to which a devotee could create a personal God. He believed that God could only be attained by soul through *bhakti*. It was Ramanuja who evolved the concept of *bhakti* by combining the rich spiritual experience of the *Alwars* and the practical methodology of *Pancharatra* and giving it a firm philosophical background. As Pande Points out, “*Bhakti* as a fully fledged personal emotion had reached its peak in the songs of the *Alwars* and in the *Bhagvata*, yet in order to save *Bhakti* from degenerating in to subjective caprice and waywardness of

emotionalism he gave it a secure objectivity by placing it on a firm philosophical basis.” (1) Therefore, with his philosophy Ramanuja brought about a synthesis of *Gyan*, *Karma* and *Bhakti* to reach absolute surrender to God. He tried to bring about a compromise between the Brahmins and the lower castes. “He tried to achieve a perfect synthesis by teaching that salvation can be obtained by *Bhakti Yoga* leading to *Prapatti* as against *Gyan Yoga* or *Karma Yoga*. He insisted on caste rules in food and performing *samskaras* but at the same time converted *Shudras* into *Vaishnavism* and allowed the untouchables the privilege of visiting certain temples once a year.” (Bandharkar 57) Ramanuja preached the message of Vaishnavism to the lower castes and declared that devotion did not mind caste, colour and the social status. He expressed the idea that *Shudras* and outcastes who could not have access to the Vedas were capable of attaining God by way of *bhakti*. This was an important step towards the upliftment of the lower castes, as before this, they were not even allowed to enter temples regularly, being able to do so only on few specific days in a year. He advocated *bhakti* as a means of attaining God but he was not totally against the philosophy of self-realization put forward by Sankracharya.

Madhvacharya was another South Indian bhakti philosopher of the thirteenth century. He believed in the philosophy of *Bhagvat Purana* that the most important hindrance in the way of liberation of the soul was the belief in the identity of *Brahma* and *Jiva*. He founded the *Dvaita Vedanta*, which was in opposition to the monistic philosophy of Sankaracharya and the qualified non-dualism of Ramanuja. “In refuting his philosophical opponents he adopts a sharp dialectic, while in establishing the structures of Vaishnavas faith he relies on the appeal to the traditional scriptures and their interpretation.” (Pande 38) According to Madhva, God was free from all imperfections and possessed infinite excellent spiritual qualities. Man could find happiness, knowledge and rest in God alone. He also emphasized the need of a spiritual Guru. “Madhva did not dispute the traditional restrictions of the Vedic study for *Shudras* but believed they had alternative avenues of spiritual progress especially devotion to God. Madhva enlarged the concept of *Bhakti*. His social outlook was reformist within bounds of liberal traditional, dynamic and activist but not revolutionary.” (Shrama, B.N.K. 27)

Vallabhacharya’s contribution in strengthening the basic philosophy of Vaishnavism was quite important. He advocated a practicable personal religion of the

heart compatible with domestic life as well as spiritual detachment. He was strong proponent of monism rather than dualism and labelled his version of monism as *Suddhadvaita*. He recognized *Brahma* as the creator of all deeds but his *Brahma* was different from *Brahma* of Sankaracharya. Sankracharya had evolved the concept of *Maya* to explain the phenomenal world as illusion. Explaining the world on similar monistic lines, Vallabhacharya rejected the category of *Maya*. According to him, scriptural revelation was the only source of knowledge about God. *Bhakti* as pure love was distinct from *bhakti* as a mode of worship. His concept of *bhakti* was of pure love assimilated to *Rasa*. This was a great development because earlier *bhakti* was considered to be a *bhav*, which could not rise to the status of *Rasa*. He gave a lot of importance to the concept of spiritual love. The love of God was not an imaginative imitation of human erotic love.

The *Dvaitadvaita Vedanta* of Nimbarka was a dualistic monism according to which *Brahman* and *Jiva* and *Brahma* and *Jagat* were different as well as non-different at the same time. In other words, Nimbarka accepted the principle of *advaita* along with *dvaita*. According to him, “The end of spiritual endeavour is to attain the feeling of oneness with God and of abiding in Him as part of His energy; and this can be achieved only through *bhakti*. Both thought and devotion are required for it, because the nature of the *Brahman* does not reveal itself without their aid. Meditation on the nature of God and participation in Him as His constituent is the same as continuous devotion for Him” (Dasgupta 154)

The medieval *Vaishnava Acharyas* differed from Sankaracharya but they did not reject his philosophy entirely. All gave equal importance to *bhakti*. Sankara’s *jnana* did not exclude *bhakti*; and the *bhakti* of Ramanuja, Nimbarka, Madhva and Vallabha included *jnana*. By *jnana*, they all meant the knowledge gained through the inner spiritual experience, and not the knowledge acquired by intellectual endeavor. *Bhakti* as religious devotion was given equal importance by all of them. Sankara related it to the *Nirguna Brahman*, and the *Vaishnava Acharyas*, to the *Saguna*.

Bhakti as a concept first evolved in the Southern regions with the hymns of *Vaishnava Alwars* and those of the *Shaiva Nayanars* and became a major movement against existing Brahmanical domination moving to Northern regions and spreading to Western, Eastern and North-Eastern regions also. The *Alwars* sprung from the

Dravidian population and were intensely personal in their attitude to God and deeply emotional in their worship. The caste did not count for them and some of the recognized saints of the *Alwars* were *Shudras* and even low caste. The movement started by the *Alwars* began outside the folds of the Brahmins but later on it also got absorbed in to the caste system.

According to the tradition, there were twelve *Alwars* including a woman. Most of them belonged to the Pallava period and came from the different parts of the Tamil country. Some of these were Brahmins and others came from different sections of society. The *Alwars* belonged to the upper strata and there was no strong reaction against the Varna system. The system was yet to penetrate deeply at the times of early *Alwars*. The *Alwars* composed hymns in poetic Tamil and their songs were influenced by the stories of Gods of the epics and *Puranas*. They were ardent lovers of Lord Vishnu and worshipped him in all his *avatars*. They emphasized the universal nature of God. The essence of their teaching was that salvation was attainable to all, even the uninitiated. The *Alwars* even tried to uplift those classes of society which were considered to be outsiders. They adopted Tamil as the language of expressing themselves with a view to popularize their teachings. Their religious fervor transcended the boundaries of caste and convention and they were held in great esteem because of their exemplary lives and noble teachings. The importance of the *Alwar* movement is that it was an emotional approach to God. The concept of humanizing the Deity, who, in turn would divinize the human souls, to make them deserve each other, happened to be the recurring theme in all the poems of the *Alwars*. They were not obsessed with the idea of *moksha* only but had emphasized the importance of right conduct in this world. This was a period when the ethical religions, Buddhism and Jainism were popular in the Tamil country and for the revival of the old faith; the Bhakti movement had to incorporate in its own system, some of the ideas of the new order. The Vedic faith, in fact, had not minimized the importance of righteousness and the *Alwars* only laid stress on what had already been taught by the scriptures.

A parallel movement along similar lines like that of *Alwars* developed among the worshippers of Shiva. These saints were known as *Nayanars* and they spread the message through their teachings that salvation could only be won by total surrender to Shiva. The *Nayanars* were sixty three in number and they belonged to all castes

though the majority of them were Brahmins. The *Shaiva* religion in the period had many facets and it grew popular because it catered to all sections of people. It preached the common people in their own language and gave a direct message which was devoid of intellectual dogma. Shaivism was based on the dual principle of *Shiva-Shakti*. It came to acquire a wider base as compared to Vaishnavism. This materialized due to the incorporation of the mother Goddess worship which absorbed all tribal and popular forms like the tree and the pillar, and deities associated with funerary practices. Lord Shiva was considered to be the God of groups belonging to the lower categories of agricultural classes and the craftsmen clan, professionally and socially differentiated from the higher agricultural groups and ruling families. Vaishnavism was largely the accepted faith of the ruling elite, especially the landed chieftains. The concept of Vishnu as the protector of the earth, as the husband of Sri or Wealth or Prosperity etc, made Vaishnavism the religion of the upper classes. Shiva – the destroyer of evil – became the Pan-Indian God of large number of lower classes.

The contributions of the Shaivites and Vaishnavites form the basis of Tamil culture and Tamil literature. “The period from seventh century to the ninth century covers the ages of the more important ones among these; others followed and kept the tradition in full vogue throughout the subsequent centuries.” (V.Raghvan as quoted by Sadarangani 13) These “others” hailed from the less privileged classes, as Champalakshmi suggests:

The propagators came from the upper strata or castes but the movement acquired popular character with the inclusion of the members of the unprivileged castes like the potter, weaver, bard, fisherman, washer man, hunter and the untouchable pariah...in the hagiological work of twelfth century A.D. however the Brahmins remained the medium through whom initiation into Bhakti religion and ritual forms of worship could take place. Thus, the movement served only to perpetuate caste hierarchy by providing a niche for all new entrants, within the four fold Brahmanical framework, with graded ritual ranking. (167)

The basic concepts of the Bhakti cult though present in the *Vedas*, the *Gita* and the *Vishnupuran* were not practiced by the masses until the appearance of

Vaishnava Alwars and *Shaiva Nayanars* of South India in the seventh and twelfth century. In South India, Bhakti tradition could be seen from the *Sangam* period onwards. *Paripadal*, a *Sangam* classic that was one of the eight anthologies introduced to the new milieu of religion and worship, namely the temple, which was to become one of the major traditions of South India. The idea of temple as a focus of this devotional cult emerged not just as a geographical but also a spiritual locale where the life of early *Alwars* took shape. *Bhakti* emerged in the form of an innovative method of uniting emotionally with the Supreme Being by way of singing His praise with love and devotion. This concept is traceable through various stages in *Alwar* poetry dominated by emotional Krishna Bhakti. The early *Alwar* bhakti had also been characterized as a special form of theistic yoga derived from *Bhagvat Gita* as a relatively calm expression of adoration, service, loyalty, a personal experience of intimacy and dependency upon God. There were elements of protest and dissent in the *Alwar* and *Nayanar* poetry representing an attempt to provide avenues of social acceptance and even mobility to less privileged castes and economic groups. Champalakhshmi has pointed out three themes in the *Bhakti* hymns. Among these, the first is the worship or bhakti of a personal God. The second is the opposition to the philosophy of the Vedic Brahmanism and to the belief that this could be the only way of attaining God's grace and liberation of the soul. The third theme in Bhakti poetry is that of the forceful denial of the Buddhist and Jain philosophy. These saint-poets, according to Nandakumar, "produced a transformatory avalanche in terms of devotion and social reform that is now known as Bhakti movement." (794) V. Raghavan referred to Bhakti as the "democratic doctrine which consolidates all people without distinctions of caste, community, nationality or sex." (32) Gail Omvedt talked of the "radical Bhakti (devotional) movement that had swept over Northern and Western India, bringing together women and men of low caste to proclaim equality and reject Brahmanic ritualism and caste hierarchy." (278) Rohini Makashi-Punekar, *On The Threshold: The Songs of Chokhamaela*, expressed Bhakti as a "deeply spiritual and democratizing" and "revolutionary in spirit" that is based on "a questioning of the orthodox and repressive Brahmanical understanding of Hinduism, (which) as such made it possible for the lower castes and women to give a form to their religious aspirations emphasizing devotion and love, not knowledge, as a means of salvation" (123-24)

The *Alwar* and *Nayanar* saint-poets used Tamil language for composing and preaching their devotional songs so that the movement could gain popularity. The saints-poets at the same time expressed resistance to the monopoly of Brahmins in attaining the divine grace by giving the right of bhakti to all human beings without any discrimination. “Bhakti as a concept evolved first in the hymns of *Vaishnava Alwars* and subsequently in those of the *Shaiva Nayanars*, growing in to an instrument of protest or dissent against Brahmin orthodoxy, existing social norms and inequalities, developing in to an ethical/moral principle capable of evolving new value systems, and providing the basis for the emergence of a dominant ideology.” (Champalakshmi 48) But, South Indian Bhakti movement also had its limitations. The South Indian saint-poets did not deliberately challenge Brahmins and the Varna system at the social level and consequently the lower rungs of the society continued to suffer. In *Bhakti*, there was no restriction to the Brahmanic practices such as paying visits to temples, worshipping idols, reciting mantras and visiting and bathing at holy places, but there was emphasis on *Bhakti* as singing praises of the Almighty God, as a more effective way of salvation. Therefore, the very temples which were epitome of Vedic Brahmanism contributed to popularizing Bhakti Movement. In this manner, Brahmanic system and the Bhakti Movement played a supportive role in strengthening each other. Thus, gradually, an important change came over the South Indian social set-up. The concept of egalitarianism gained strength and the lower caste people were given the right to preach, the right to worship God, the right to salvation and also the access to the *Vedas*.

During the same time, there was the development of two schools of religious thoughts, the Vaishnavite school which was based on *Vedanta Upanishads* propounded by Sankrayacharya, Ramanuja and Ramananda, and the Krishnite school which was based on the *Bhagvata Puarana* which was propounded by men like Nimbarka, Vallabhacharya and Chaitnaya. Vallabhacharya was the popular saint of Andhra Pradesh and popularized Krishna Bhakti. Surdas and Mira Bai followed his footsteps and the whole of the Northern region reverberated with their passionate devotional poetry. Tulsidas was also regarded as a great philosopher of Northern India. His *Ramcharitmanas* became an immensely popular scripture revered by the common people. Tulsi’s intense devotion to Lord Rama made the very name ‘Rama’ the greeting word for the masses. *Ramcharitmanas* became a holy book that could be

found in almost every Hindu house and its impact on people was so great that 'Rama' became the ideal for them to be followed and imitated in all the walks of life. Bengali poets Jayadev, Chaitnaya and Chandidas and Assamese poet Shankradeva led the Bhakti Movement in Eastern India whereas, Jnaneshwar, Namdev, Tukaram and Eknath were the poets who contributed to the *Varkari* tradition in the Western region with their devotional poetry full of intense emotion.

Shaivism developed in South India from seventh century onwards and during the same period it was also a dominant religion in Northern and central India. A branch of the *Shaivism* which became very popular in North-Western part of Karnataka was Virashaivism. Virashaivites or 'the heroic followers of Shiva' were also known as *Lingayatas*. Like other offshoots of the Bhakti movement, they were also characterized by the combination of egalitarianism and spiritual excellence. The movement arose under the dynamic leadership of Basava, a Brahmin by birth, who refused to undergo the sacred thread ceremony that entitled a high caste male to become *dvija*, the twice born. Having declassed himself, he gained the confidence of the masses and led a movement against the Brahmin domination. The movement targeted those rituals and practices that sanctified inequalities and exploitation. The followers created their own sacred literature in the form of *vachanas*. Their literature rejected the caste system almost completely. The egalitarian ideals of the *Virashaivas* implied a new morality in which the people were required to break with their problematic past and give up all caste pride together with the vices of their background.

The contribution of female bhakti poets was a very important aspect of Virashaivism. It denounced the idea expressed in *Manusmriti* about the subordination of women and caste a new light on male-female relation. Even the revolutionary poets like Akka Mahadevi and Muktayakka could find a place in Virashaivism. Akka Mahadevi appeared to imply in her hymns that traditional distinctions were of no value to those who experienced the divine love. Background or pretensions did not matter to the true devotees in her eyes.

The *Lingayatas* adopted a pragmatic approach to realize their ideals and came up with alternative rituals, ceremonies, taboos and other religio-cultural symbols. The movement not only rejected the core values and social institutions associated with

Brahmins but also developed an institutional framework for an egalitarian order. The movement soon influenced the nearby regions and assumed a lot of significance because it created an alternate space against the existing hierarchical structures of Brahmanical superiority. “The ideology of protesting against inequalities, differential power and a narrowing of the access to economic power that alienated the Brahmins from the non-Brahmins, became very popular. They added immense popularity to their faith by preaching the concept of bhakti to the people.” (Pande, Rekha 142)

There also appeared a number of *Shaivite* ascetics who haunted cemeteries, ate from skulls and even consumed corpses at the burning *ghats*. From the twelfth century onwards, the *Nath* yogis began to spread throughout Northern and central India. They were part Buddhists and part *Shavite* and anti-Brahmanical. Whatever their religious and cultural orientation, there were no question about their thoroughgoing social radicalism. These *Naths* initiated members of all castes, including weavers and low artisan castes, into their non-hierarchical order. Their use of forbidden food and drink and advocacy of free sex as a means to attain awareness could be interpreted as an open revolt against the excessive do's and don'ts preached by the *Pundits*. But the appeal of Tantrism remained limited on account of its very esoteric nature. Brahmins branded the whole system of Tantrism as ‘immoral’ because of their use of forbidden food and drink. The state also looked upon *Tantriks* with suspicion and ill-concealed hostility. The esoteric nature of their practice and the secretive manner in which they communicated their ideals and conducted their activities could be understood as a device to escape social and political persecution. The *Nathpanthis* , who under Gorakhnath, adopted a high moral tone, tried with some success to meet the Brahmanical attack, and set up their centres in different parts of North and Western India, and even in some parts of the South. It was these socio-religious forces that provided a conducive atmosphere for the Bhakti movement to take root in all parts of the country. The Bhakti movement in South touched the peak in the tenth century. After this, it gradually started accepting the Brahmanic beliefs and practices like caste system and supremacy of the Brahmins among the four castes. In North India, the *Varkari* movement started with Namdev in the second half of the fourteenth century, Kabir's popular monotheism in the fifteenth century and popular Vaishnavism, which upheld the worship of *Rama* and *Krishna* during the sixteenth century.

Bhakti movement flourished in South India and then it travelled to North India

and spread to different parts of India in different periods. “When Bhakti, entered North India, it was already centuries old and did not have to spend all the energies in evolving but could replicate many of the features that were already part of the Southern Bhakti.” (157) There were many points of differences between the Bhakti movement of the North and the South. There were only two main castes in the South i.e. Brahmins and *Shudras*. *Kshatriya* caste did not exist in South India. The number of Brahmins in South India was also very less as compared to the North. As a result, the Brahmins were not as powerful as they were in the North. So, the Bhakti movement could grow more easily in a relatively simpler and less hierarchical society. Moreover, the easy targets of the Bhakti movement were not the Brahmins, but Jains and Buddhists who held a dominant position during those times. So, the Bhakti Saints combated Jains and Buddhists ideas and this in turn suited the Brahmins. This also explains the role of the temples in the growth of the Bhakti movement in South India. Although the Bhakti Movement in the South promoted the idea of equality among human beings yet it did not denounce the Varna system or the superiority of the Brahmins. However the *Virashaiva* movement, which followed the path of *bhakti* and came to the fore front during the twelfth and the thirteenth centuries, adopted a strongly radical and heterodox attitude. The movement also differed from one region to another.

In order to get a clear idea of the Bhakti movement, we will have to understand the various changes that were taking place on the political, economic, social and religious level. The medieval period was characterized by the emergence of a number of regional states. The medieval period witnessed the downfall of an omnipotent state and saw the emergence of various provinces and regional states. The power of the local landed elites increased and the long distant trade also got setback. The Brahmins were allocated a larger portion of land ever than before. The emergence of the *Rajputs* in North India accepted the support of the Brahmins and in turn granted them large areas of land for the building and maintenance of temples. The Brahmins acquired more power, wealth and privileges and were also appointed as *Raj-Purohits*. They were consulted on various matters regarding the religion and the state. Thus, in socio-religious milieu of medieval India there was domination of *Rajput-Brahmin* alliance which was not ready to accept any kind of dissenting ideas or philosophies. Brahmins had presented the images of God not as symbols of God but as if the images

themselves were God who could be commanded by them. Society had become more and more ritualistic. In order to preserve their supremacy, the Brahmins indulged in various complicated rituals and practices. Those who did not find a suitable place in the conventional caste system were regarded as outcastes. At the same time, those who doubted the power and potency of the Brahmins were cast down. The ancient religious texts were written in Sanskrit and only the orthodox Brahmins could read and recite them. The Brahmins regarded the *Vedas* and scriptures as sacred and held that rulers must uphold the values enshrined in them.

The Brahmins legitimized the existing rulers as incarnation of gods. These rulers were given the divine status by the Brahmins as they believed in the theory of incarnation. The advent of Islam and Turkish conquest brought this supremacy to an end and paved the way for the rise of a large number of heterodox movements. The Turks took away the temple wealth from the Brahmins and put an end to the royal funding for Brahmanical activities. The images which were symbols of God as represented by Brahmins were broken and trampled under the foot by the Turks and no harm befell on them for doing this. The Muslim rulers coming to North India and the Turks defeating the *Rajputs* by the end of the twelfth century led to the emergence of such circumstances that prepared the ground for the emergence of the Bhakti movement as a mighty force during the next few centuries. The Bhakti Saints regarded the sacred texts just as *pothis* and weapons of Brahmanical domination. The rejection of the concept of incarnation by the saints was not just a matter of theological choice but it had political overtones also. The Bhakti Saints were not ready to compromise on these matters as they treated these rulers as ordinary mortals.

With the diminishing influence of the Brahmins, the *Nath-panthi* yogis got the benefits. This sect seemed to have reached the height of its prestige and influence during the thirteenth and the fourteenth centuries. Thus, with the Brahmins losing power and their hold over the common people enhanced greater liberty for the dissident movements to grow and the ground was cleared for the development of popular monotheism. The advent of Islam in India had profound effects on its political, religious and socio-cultural life leading to structural changes. Face to face with the egalitarian social ideal of Islam, where God did not discriminate among different people, the social rigidity of the Hindus was not relaxed and caste distinctions continued to exist. Conversely, the lofty ideals of toleration of various

religious sects and creeds of Hinduism were not accepted by Islam. Many scholars like Tara Chand and Yusuf Hussain are of the opinion that the Bhakti movement came about as a result of the Islamic influence on Indian religion and culture. There are many similarities between Bhakti movement and Islam because both of them focused on the universal brotherhood and making religion as simple as possible. The impact of Bhakti movement and Sufism appeared to be reciprocal because the Sufi concept of *Pir*, mystic union with beloved *Fana*, coincided with many of the concepts of Bhakti. At the same time, there are other scholars who do not agree with these views. They are of the opinion that the Bhakti movement was further stimulated by the presence of the Sufis and Islamic culture because the emergence of the Bhakti movement and advent of Islam was concurrent in the Northern and North-western regions of India. The very idea that the Bhakti Movement emerged as a response to the advent of Islam in India is not acceptable because even before this, the tradition of singing praises to the Almighty with all emotional fervor was prevalent in Indian culture since long before. There are references to this way of bhakti in *Bhagvat Purana* and even Ramanuja talked about such practices in his commentaries. Such practices were common in India even before the inception of Islam. Therefore, the proposition would be considered impossible to believe that the coming of Islam could ever be the causal factor behind the rise of the Bhakti Movement. However, prevalence of Islam in India seemed to have given a boost to the spread of the Bhakti movement because the Muslim invasion had resulted in the loss of power and the state funding of the Brahmins and the severity and strictness of the grip of Hindu Brahmanical culture over the common people had been loosened. Thus, the advent of Islam could only be a supportive factor in the growth of the pre-existing Bhakti. “The Sufis (who were in fact rebels against orthodox Islam), and the Hindu Saints (who were placed similarly vis-à-vis the Brahmin orthodoxy), were actually to become the meeting points for Islam and Hinduism, and a rich sharing and exchange of spiritual values, thoughts, and modes of devotion followed.” (Sadarangani 56)

Although the Turkish rule in India was well established by the first quarter of the thirteenth century, the rise of Bhakti in a popular form in the region hardly antedates Kabir, who is assigned to the fifteenth century. The delay is generally accounted for by the stunning effect of the Turkish conquest, the continued violence and the warfare and the resulting social instability which followed. The

Turkish conquest itself was followed by the onslaught of the Mongols who brought about large scale death and destruction in the area. However, the violence and bloodshed were accompanied by a slow, imperceptible process of regeneration which came to the surface in the fourteenth century. The Turkish domination was replaced by a ruling class which had a broader social base among the Muslims.

The view that many low caste Hindus embraced Islam willingly because of their ill-treatment by those of the upper caste is quite mistaken. The fact is that the condition imposed by the Muslims 'Islam or the sword' was very terrifying, and many irrespective of caste could not face death. It was only later that, finding it impossible to exterminate Hinduism this way, the device of charging *jizyah* advocated by the Holy *Quran* was enforced. As the rigors of the caste system weighed heavily upon the lower classes among the Hindus, they were attracted by the position of the absolute religious and social equality which Islam offered to every Hindu, irrespective of class or creed, who embraced the new faith.

It has been argued that Bhakti grew in the North as kind of defense mechanism, to save the Hindu society from the immediate threat of subversion from Islam and the challenge posed to it by Islamic doctrines of egalitarianism, brotherhood and simplicity. There is little evidence to show that during the thirteenth and the fourteenth century, the Hindu society was in any imminent danger of subversion due to appeal of Islam. The majority of the population remained Hindu. The converts from the lower castes among Hindus continued to feel discriminated against. Even materially, the converts could hope to gain only marginally by securing government employment of a low grade. Economic life continued to remain in the hands of Hindus. Hindus, in fact, dominated even at the local levels of the government. In the same way, the Brahmins continued to perform various rituals and ceremonies with traditional superstitions from birth to death.

During the thirteenth century, there were changes in the socio-economic set-up that led to the rise of various heterodox groups which did not go with the tradition. These dissident groups tried to carve a niche for themselves in the social hierarchical structure and thus attempted to modify the pre-existing social hierarchy. The dissatisfied people of the lower order favoured heterodox movements which voiced sentiments of protest and dissent. The growth of the centralized Turkish state and the

introduction of the new products in the expanding markets directly benefitted the class of merchants and traders. The merchants were also not happy with the social status assigned to them in a society dominated by Brahmins and the feudal classes represented by *Kshatriyas*. Thus, Bhakti was a reflection of the aspirations of the newly emerging agrarian and artisanal groups whose economic position improved on account of the large scale material changes, namely agrarian expansion and craft diversification. With their revolutionary poetry, the saint-poets contributed a lot in restructuring the social set-up in which there would be lesser discrimination against certain groups and people could live harmoniously in an egalitarian society.

In the beginning, the Bhakti was considered a literary or philosophical revolution which projected religion as the source of all spiritual motivation. Besides “being a literary or religious movement, Bhakti was solely rooted to the ground and was a reflection of the aspirations of the newly emerging agrarian and artisanal groups whose economic position improved on account of the large scale material changes, namely agrarian expansion and craft diversification.” (Pande, Rekha 26) These new social groups that emerged out of the working class made attempts to recreate themselves in the social hierarchical order and started a movement to reconstruct the prevalent hierarchy.

The Marxist historians have looked upon the Bhakti movement within the socio-economic context. To them, the bhakti ideology is one of the submission as well as dissent. The link between bhakti and feudalism was first established by D.D. Kosambi. Writing on the *Bhagvat Gita*, he interpreted the doctrine of Bhakti as, “unflinching loyalty to God similar to the loyalty that linked together in a powerful chain the serf and the retainer to the feudal lord.” (208) This, he maintained, went well with the ideology of feudalism. “Though bhakti was the basic need in a feudal ideology, its fruits were not enjoyed equally by all. By the twelfth century, feudal taxation had begun to weigh heavily upon the peasantry, who paid not only for the luxurious palace but also its counterpart the equally rich and even more ornate temple.” (Kosambi 32) Irfan Habib speaks of the “ties of caste and religious communities”, in the peasant uprising and speaks of Kabir, Dadu and Nanak as leaders of the movement that led to the formation of new religious communities during the medieval period.” (332)

By the beginning of the fourteenth century, there was considerable growth in towns and expansion in craft production and commerce due to the improvement in technology. With the expansion of the artisan class, the ruling class demanded certain goods which led to the creation of new skills and crafts. The lower castes readily adopted new professions, for that could give them a new dignity in the caste hierarchy. Thus, this meant the breaking of the caste rules. The anti-caste religious movements of Kabir and Nanak found greater following amongst the growing class of these artisans in Northern India.

Irfan Habib's views on the Bhakti movement as a growth of the class of artisans were borrowed from Muhammad Habib. He had used the argument to explain the causes of the easy political access of the Muslim invaders in India. According to him, their success was due to the appeal of the new egalitarian ideology of Islam and the growing class of artisans in urban areas who were keen to get their freedom from the shackles of the caste system. Linking up the Bhakti movement with urban centres and its artisan class has become a common characteristic of the Marxist writing on the subject. Romila Thapar comes to the generalization that, "it was an urban movement which drew strength from the lower caste urban groups and urban professional castes." (68) Thus, Kabir and Nanak are sometimes described as men who expressed the sentiments of the urban class in towns, and of the artisans in the villages who were in contact with the towns. In this way, the anti-caste movements of Kabir and Nanak attracted the lower castes everywhere, irrespective of the rural/urban divisions.

As has been discussed above, Bhakti originated in the South and then travelled to North India and became popular during the medieval period in the fourteenth and the fifteenth centuries. There was a connection between the two regions because Ramananda, the disciple of Ramanuja, was the main founder of the Bhakti movement in North India. He got his schooling under the orthodox school of Vaishnavism but he was not very strict about the practices of *Vaishnava* Brahmanism. He was an egalitarian reformer who adopted people from the modest background and lower sections of the society as his disciples and dismissed the formalities of the caste system. The most important contribution of Ramananda was that he opened the path of *bhakti* for everyone irrespective of their caste and creed. "He thus departed from Ramanuja, who had tried to establish a careful balance between the *Dharamashastra* and popular *bhakti* by espousing *prapatti* which had been advocated by *Nath Muni*

earlier and which was open to all, while restricting *jnana*, *karma* and *bhakti* as the prerogatives of the upper castes.” (Bhandarkar 57)

Ramananda was the chief inspirer of the worship of Rama in the Bhakti movement in North India towards the close of the thirteenth century and the beginning of the fourteenth century and he witnessed the spread of Islam and the impact of the Sufis in this region. His followers could be grouped into two schools. The first were strictly orthodox and accepted the authority of the *Vedas*. This School was represented by Nabhadas and Tulsidas. The second School was represented by Kabir and his followers and was more eclectic and skeptic in its approach to *Vedas* and Hindu rituals and extended the same principal of skepticism and rejection of scriptures and rituals in Islam.

In the way of conceptualization of God, Bhakti in North India could be visualized in two main forms: *Nirguna* and *Saguna*. Those who preferred *Saguna* (with attributes) worshipped Vishnu and Shiva as anthropomorphic manifestations of the Almighty. The persons who followed *Nirguna* (without attributes) Bhakti generally worshipped a divine being who remained mostly unmanifest and non-anthropomorphic. In actual practice, most followers of *Saguna* religion in North India today direct their devotion especially towards two *avatars* of the god Vishnu – Krishna and Rama. On the other hand, followers of the *Nirguna* religion generally reject worship of *avatars* of Vishnu or any other anthropomorphic gods or forms of god. The *Nirguna* Bhakti stream which believed in formless deity without attributes also developed along two streams. One was the *Gyan Marg*, which gave importance to knowledge and Yogic practices and the other was *Prem Marg*, which gave importance to love and was more influenced by the Sufi thought. *Saguna* stream developed into Krishna Bhakti as well as Rama Bhakti.

While some scholars have stressed the common features of *Nirguna* and *Saguna* traditions, many well known Indian scholars – most notably P. Barthwal, Parsuram Chaturvedi and Hazari Prasad Dvivedi – have emphasized their differences. Ram Chandra Shukla set forth the concept of Bhakti period. He talked of the two distinctive ideological groups. “Kabir, Raidas, Dadu, etc. were placed in the *Nirguna* category (due to their faith in the non-incarnate, formless God) and the *Vaishnava* devotees of the later period such as Surdas and Tulsidas were placed in the *Saguna*

category (as they championed the cause of a personal incarnate God in a human form.” (60) In his book, *The Nirguna School of Hindi Poetry*, P. D. Barthwal has given important information about a number of saint-poets and their utterances. American and European scholars K. Schomer and W. H. McLeod have also emphasized on the theological and ideological differences. As John Stratton Hawley points out, “Charlotte Vaudeville and W.H. McLeod are two influential scholars who observe that in classical Hindi Bhakti poetry, we often come across the *Saguna* form of God, but from this *Saguna* manifestation, the *Nirguna* one can be easily differentiated”. (5) Karine Schomer also observes:

The concept of ‘*Nirguna Bhakti*’ as a distinct devotional mode contrasting with ‘*Saguna Bhakti*’, and of the Sants constituting a separate devotional tradition, is relatively new. The idea that there is a coherent body of Sant teachings (*Sant Mat*) and that individual Sants belong to a common spiritual life of descent (*Sant Parampara*) distinct from that of sectarian Vaishnavas did not become fully crystallized until the mid- nineteenth century. (3)

John Stratton Hawley remarks that the *Nirguna* and the *Saguna* groups appear to be theologically different in their conception of God but “they all inherited a single, massive Bhakti.” (6) He further points out that there was frequent mixing up of *Nirguna* and *Saguna* forms because of which the two categories could not be considered absolutely separated from each other. David Lorenzen emphasizes that in order to study the poetry of medieval Bhakti Saints, one must be aware of the differences between the *Nirguna* and *Saguna* traditions. He takes this *Nirguna-Saguna* distinction to another level when he identifies two different groups having contrasting ideologies – those of domination and resistance. He argues, “Although the contrast between the *Saguna* and *Nirguna* tradition is usually defined in theological terms – both by outside observers and by the followers of these two traditions – it is the social ideologies of the two traditions that lie behind and give strength to these differing ideologies. And behind the ideologies lie the communities themselves.” (13) He talked of the ideas in poetry of the Bhakti Saints in terms of Antonio Gramsci’s concept of “hegemony and resistance”. He asserts, “It is precisely the distinction between hegemonic and subordinate or subaltern ideological discourse that underlies the distinction between the *Nirguna* and *Saguna* devotional movements.” (23) He concluded that the followers of the *Saguna* tradition belonged to the elite hegemonic

class dominated by the Brahmins whereas the followers of *Nirguna* constituted the subaltern class. In the Northern region, the *Nirguna* Bhakti practiced by these subaltern groups served to portray their ideological resistance.

As we have already come to know that Bhakti movement produced self-illumination in two forms: first in the form of *Saguna* worship centered on the *Puranic avatars* and second, in the form of the religious practice of *Nirguna* love Bhakti centered on yogic meditation on the *Nirguna* Brahman. An important difference between *Saguna* and *Nirguna* traditions is that the stories about *avatars* are a basic defining element of the former while in the latter usually either the existence of the *avatars* is denied or their importance downgraded. The second pillar of *Saguna* ethics is, of course the doctrine of *varnasramadharm*. According to this doctrine, one obtains a better rebirth precisely by following the rules of conduct appropriate to *varna* and *jati* (caste) in which one was born. As David Lorenzen argues:

When we come to *nirguna* religion, the lower class and lower caste identity of most of its followers and many of its leaders and poets is not in doubt. In the poetry of the more important early leaders of *nirguna* tradition such as Kabir, Raidas and Guru Nanak, the outright rejection of the theology, ritual practices, and social ideology of *saguna* religion is clear and explicit. (21)

Against the attempted subversion of the brahmanical order by *Nirguna* stalwarts such as Kabir, Ravi Dass, Dadu and Nanak, the proponents of *Saguna School* tried to establish the infallibility of the *shastras*, and prescribed adherence to the caste code of conduct as necessary for good life. *Saguna* bhakti implied worship of gods and their *avatars* whose mythology was the brain child of the priestly class. The *Nirgunas'* preference for an impersonal deity instead of *devas*, their *avatars* and *lilas* was deliberate and premeditated. Thus, the tension between *Saguna* and *Nirguna* was profound and acquired special importance in the socio-cultural context of medieval India. At the cultural-ideological level, it reflected hegemony of the caste elites and counter-hegemony of the subaltern masses and their ongoing struggle.

The ideology and antecedents of Kabir set him apart from the *Saguna bhaktas* of the medieval period. The *Nirguna* and the *Saguna bhaktas* did not share a common

ideology and their sources of inspiration were also different. They represented very different socio-religious and intellectual currents of the medieval period.

The early Sants criticized, ridiculed and rejected the social order based on brahmanical dominance and caste hierarchy. Being uncompromising monotheists, Kabir and other great Sants also rejected Puranic modes of worship, including idol worship, and the concept of incarnation. They clearly distanced themselves from the Vaishnavas of various hues. However, rejection of Puranic lore and Vaishnavism did not imply wholesale rejection of existing cultural forms, myths and symbols. The Sants adopted and reinterpreted many existing traditions. (Bahuguna 225)

Whereas *Saguna* religious practice sprinkled interior love on the dryness of the external *achara* of the Hindu caste and filled it with *rasa*, on the other hand *Nirguna* religious practice made an effort to eliminate completely the dryness of the external *achara*. *Saguna* Bhakti adopted the path of compromise whereas *Nirguna* Bhakti trod on the path of rebellion. As far as *Saguna* Bhakti is concerned, it took the help of scriptures to justify the ways of God to the men; *Nirguna* Bhakti went deep in the lap of wisdom. The devotees who worshipped with *Saguna* emotion experienced God by looking at him from afar, while the devotees who worshipped with *Nirguna* emotion considered realization of God within one's soul as their highest aim.

From the discussion above it is amply clear that the *Nirguna* tradition dwelled on the roots of Bhakti, its strict monotheism and distinctive way of perceiving God, its denunciation of Vedic Brahmanism and Islam and their sacred books and further, its rejection of the Varna system. On the other hand, the *Saguna* Vaishnavites were considered to have conformed to the fundamental principles of caste system and dominance of the Brahmins

The process of the popularization of the *Nirguna* ideology had started long before Kabir through *Nath-Pantha* but he gave it the form which we know as medieval school of *Nirguna* Bhakti. The beginnings made by Kabir were carried further by Nanak, Dadu, Ravi Dass etc.

Chaitanya preached in Bengal the religion of one God under the name of Vishnu. He was a renowned Vaishnavite. He was monotheistic in his approach towards God who was given the name of Krishna and Hari. He believed that it was possible to win the grace of God by way of loving Him, singing praises and dancing. He emphasized realizing a special God in an esoteric manner. He also stressed the inevitability of a Guru for this purpose. He rejected discrimination on the basis of caste and stressed equality among all human beings. He denounced the supremacy of the Brahmins. He did not believe in religious rituals and ceremonies and laid emphasis on the inner method of realizing God. Though he did not start any sect but his followers have organized a new sect in his name. He was basically a religious philosopher and due to his religious experiments he came into conflict with the prevalent social system. His flouting of caste rules was also evident from the fact that he, himself a Brahmin, maintained social contacts with people of lower castes and with Muslims. Chaitanya's Krishna Bhakti, based on purity and simplicity, was a contrast to the prevalent formal and ritualistic religious system of Vaishnavism. His spiritual simplicity posed a threat to the priestly class and liberated the common people from ecclesiastical tyranny. His thoughts led to the emergence of an enlightened *Vaishnava* community distinct from the traditional one.

Surdas was responsible for the revival and growth of Krishna love in his *Saguna* form. To him the love of Radha for Krishna was the essence of *Veda*, the *Gita* and the *Puranas*. He could not completely rise above his caste leanings and was not vehement like the *Nirgunas* in denouncing caste. Rather, he advocated the caste system.

The period of Mira was a period of upsurge of Krishna cult in Rajasthan. She was a passionate devotee of Lord Krishna and sang praises of her lord in *Braj bhasha*. She is said to have written about four hundred verses in three languages – Hindi, Gujarati and Rajasthani. The subject of Mira's *bhakti* was intensely personal and her personality could be clearly felt in all her verses. Her *bhakti* was disapproved by her in-laws; she stayed the in temple of Krishna and started wandering around in the company of other saints and visited many temples and palaces associated with Krishna. She was one of the earliest women to break the laws governing her class and royalty in refusing to follow the conventions of the society. Her unwavering faith and dedication to *Giridhar Gopal* was the source of her strength. She paid no heed to her

defamation in the society. Her ecstatic and unyielding love for Krishna caused repugnance to the royal class of Mewar. She silently rebelled against the conventions of the royal family. She used to hold discussions with Saints and enjoyed the company of the common people while singing *bhajans*. This tarnished her image in the society and enraged her family members. But she disregarded those laws that distanced her from her Lord. As Leela Mulati observed, “Bhakti gave Mira entry in to religious field as a passive follower but this movement gave the more capable woman leadership of other women and sometimes of the entire sect.”(8-9)

Tulsidas was an important conformist of the Ramaite *Saguna* School. His *Ramcharitmanas* is the most influential and famous writing of medieval bhakti tradition. It expressed Tulsidas’ deep devotion to Rama, an *avatar* of Vishnu, the great liberator of the soul. Tulsidas, with all his devotion to Rama, did not start a sect of his own. He, rather, conformed to the traditional Hindu sect of beliefs and customs. He was not against liberal ideas, but opposed the radical trend of uprooting altogether the *Vaishnava* traditions and criticizing the Vedic authority. He believed that the Varna system was fundamentally based on a social division of labour. He emphasized its utility by pointing out that the existing social disorder was caused by the breakdown of the essence of this system. He tried to build up an ideal society on a solid base of moral and ethical values in family life. He was not against the concept of equality but was more concerned with the social disorder, which was due to the encroachment of the members of one caste on the functions of the other. So, for a stable society it was necessary for all the four Varnas to perform their own respective duties without interfering in the others’ defined areas. His *Ramcharitmanas*, thus, symbolized an ideal form of social interaction. He never aimed at founding a new religious order or going out of the *Varnashramdharma* and tried to eliminate the evils of superstitions and formalism. For this reason, he denounced the religious monopoly of the Brahmins by referring to them contemptuously as ‘*Bhudevas*’ and ‘*Bhusuras*’.

Both Tulsidas and Chaitanya stressed the importance of the essence of Varna system for social stability. Both of them believed in Rama and Krishna as embodiment of God, and in idol worship, but were not ready to accept useless rituals and formalities. They helped people to differentiate between true religion and superstition. They took up not only the socio-religious matters but also the political,

administrative and economic aspects and the material conditions and hardships faced by the common people.

Maharashtra was another region where the Bhakti movement made its powerful presence felt. The Maharashtra *Dharma* was also a part of the Bhakti movement which emerged as a reform movement from the fold of Hinduism, for socio-religious readjustment in order to achieve a better social position for the lower class people. It was the cult of *Vitthal* or *Vithoba* which became popular in all of Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh and Tamilnadu. The cult was led by saint-poets who generally belonged to the lower strata of society, such as *Kunbis*, tailors, carpenters, potters, barbers and even the outcaste *Mahars*. The saint-poets from the lower spectrum of society struggled for religious equality and demanded social justice based on the humanitarian principle. They challenged the religious monopoly of the Brahmins and took over the spiritual leadership. The cult was initially spiritual and liberal. The movement produced three outstanding saint-poets: Namdev, a tailor by profession, Chokhamela who hailed from the 'untouchable' Mahar caste and Tukaram, who also came from the low caste.

Namdev was a calico-printer and his hymns in Marathi and Hindi were marked by deep bhakti and contained elements which provided a base for the *Nirguna* Bhakti movement in Northern India. He was regarded as a link between the Northern Bhakti movement and the Maharashtra Bhakti movement. He was against idol worship and elaborated rituals as a means to attain God. He referred to his God in different ways, *Vitthal*, *Ram*, *Hari* but his God was a *Nirgun* God that did not have a form. He discarded the traditional religion and its mechanical performance and rituals, emphasizing that true religion should better concern with the people's misery and helplessness. He was a man of the masses and gave expression to the inner and worldly agonies of man in his verses. Later, he became itinerant and finally settled in Punjab where he played the role of a bridge-builder between the North and South in the context of Bhakti radicalism.

Chokhamela was another striking personality of Varkari saint-poets. Born in 'untouchable' *Mahar* caste, he was to the Maharashtrian *dalits* what Ravi Dass was to the *dalits* of North India. However, the temper of Chokha was less rebellious than that of Kabir and Ravi Dass, who were more radical in their rejection of rituals and

beliefs, including idol-worship. But Chokha's devotionalism represented an attack on the unjust and inhuman caste order that denied the lowly born even the right to offer prayers.

The Varakari tradition reached its pinnacle of glory with Tukaram. He was born in a grocer's family and was persecuted by Brahmins for the growing popularity of his rebellious social thinking. While the Bhakti Saints in other regions, especially in the North, had adopted a monotheistic radicalism, the Varakari adopted a middle way by honouring their only God, *Vitthal*. However, all of them had similar socio-religious agenda and their common target was the entrenched Brahmin orthodoxy.

However, the Maharashtrian saint-poets could not develop a consistent radical critique of Brahmanism like their counterparts in the North and South because some of their fellow-travellers – Gyaneshwar and Eknath, who came from Brahmin families found it difficult to disown their scriptures. On one hand, they approved of equalitarian thinking and made some noises, but, on the other hand, they strongly upheld the *shastras* and *smritis* that sanctioned all kinds of divisions among individuals on religious grounds.

Kabir, the leader of the *Nirguna* sect, with his Bhakti tradition excelled Tulsidas and Surdas belonging to the *Saguna* sect. The abstract *Nirguna* God worshipped by Kabir differed not only from the concrete God of the *Saguna* sect but was also very clearly different from the complete abstract form of God discussed in the *Vedas* and *Upanishads* where it was represented by the concept of 'Shunya'. Kabir occupied a unique place in the *Nirguna* tradition for he took it to the common man and gave it the character of a popular religion. As Krishna Sharma opines:

“What had been associated earlier with Brahmanical learning and was explained in abstruse and philosophical language by men like Sankaracharya was conveyed by him in a simple and straight forward manner. What had remained the monopoly of the learned Brahmins till then was presented by the low caste Kabir in the spoken language of the people. The thought which had remained enshrined in the scholarly Sanskrit works was transmitted by him with a spontaneous poetic flourish through simple *dohas* and *padas* which could be easily understood. (194-95)

According to Kabir, scholarly learning and observance of religious obligation could never lead to salvation. Scriptures and philosophical writings could not describe the final truth. Through his utterances of *dohas* and *padas*, Kabir was able to bring the essence of Vedantic learning within the reach of all and was able to turn mysticism into a popular religious cult.

Guru Nanak laid stress on moral virtues in order to put an end to the religious conflicts. “His ideas remind us of the basic principles of the *Upanishads* when he declared that God is one. In keeping with the true *Nirguna* bhakti tradition, Guru Nanak described God as pure light through which everything was illuminated. His bhakti was more positive in its outlook, clear in its spiritualism and emphatic in the ethics.” (Gandhi 62) Guru Nanak rejected asceticism and laid stress on the life of a householder. He discarded all formalism and ritualism and emphasized on the adoption of ethical qualities. Of the three parts of *Vedas* i.e. *Karma Kanda*, *Upasana Kanda* and *Gyan Kanda*, Guru Nanak accepted only the last one. He rejected all prejudices of caste, colour and birth and stressed on equal status of man and woman in the society. He advocated significant importance to women and imparted all the rights in the society to them. He did not accept the idea of the delimitation of the universe expressed by the contemporary religions. He argued with the theologians of his day that the creation of the infinite Lord could not be finite. Guru Nanak lent a new dimension to the Bhakti movement in North-West region.

Guru Nanak was non-conformist with a vision. Unlike other religious leaders with radical views, he preached a missionary religion and gave an organized fight to traditional Hinduism. Whereas the other radical thinkers only criticized the existing systems without suggesting alternatives, Nanak’s approach was positive and practical, with a definite aim and socio-religious program in mind. He regulated the community life of his followers who were required strictly to worship together in congregation and to dine together.

Like Kabir, Nanak was also a monotheist and monist, believing in that God is one, without attributes and everywhere manifest. Similarly he did not believe in the *avatar* theory and rejected the idolatry which was the outcome of the concept of God taking physical forms. He also refused to recognize any restriction based on birth. He asserted that every man, irrespective of his position in the caste hierarchy, was

eligible for salvation. He rejected the very idea of impurity to any human being and refused to admit anyone being untouchable. He castigated professional Brahmins as greedy and selfish..

Ravi Dass was another Bhakti stalwart in the North who came from the lower rungs of society. He mentioned that he belonged to same group to which great Bhakti poets like Namdev, Trilochan and Kabir belonged. "In mentioning these three as recipients of divine grace along with him, Ravi Dass underscored his sense of solidarity with a tradition of Bhakti that flowed with particular animation in the lower ranks of society." (Hawley 25) Like his kindred souls, Ravi Dass' spirituality was tinged with humanitarian ethos and egalitarian values. His conception of God as -'deliverer of the poor', 'up lifter of the lowly' and 'purifier of the defiled' reflected his concern for the weak and the marginalized. He resisted the efficacy of the caste system and spoke of an ideal egalitarian society. Various references to his own caste in his poetry clearly indicate that he was always conscious about his social standing in the society. He stressed that even the lowest of the low could rise to great heights by acquiring noble qualities. With this understanding, he kept engaged in his leather-work and repeatedly referred to his humble birth, underscoring the dignity of an occupation and caste that had come to be regarded as disgraceful.

Dadu was another great non-conformist man of the Bhakti movement. Kabir's ideas appeared to have had great impact on Dadu and his followers. Dadu himself had shown much indebtedness to Kabir by referring to him frequently in his sayings. Moreover, there is much similarity in the content. Many of Dadu's verses appear to be simply variants of the popular sayings of Kabir. The strict monotheistic concept that God is one and there is no difference between '*Ram* and *Allah*' is well reflected in the verses of Dadu. Like Kabir and Nanak, he forbade the practice of idolatry among his followers. He also prohibited the eating of flesh and sought to avoid causing pain to any living creature. Like other non-conformists, Dadu was also concerned with the religious differences between Hindus and Muslims and wanted to bring the people out of the narrow limitations of religious belief and practice. He challenged the infallibility of the religious scriptures of both the communities and considered the early scriptures as biased sources that led to conflict. He also denounced the social hierarchy maintained by the caste system and tried to assert the equality of all human

beings in society. He emphasized that true bhakti was not possible without losing one's personal identity in God.

From Kabir to Dadu, the poetry of all these Bhakti Poets gives expression to development of resistance in the society. The social resistance manifested in Bhakti poetry can be studied in terms of Antonio Gramsci's concept of ideological struggle and his notion of hegemony.

Wherever there is power, resistance to it is a natural phenomenon. Domination leads to resistance and resistance is an outcome of power play. It is conditioned by those very social and political power structures that it seeks to challenge. Resistance plays an important role in the power relationship between the dominant and the marginalized classes. It emerges as a result of the uttermost anguish against intolerable atrocities committed by the dominant powers. In order to seek liberation from dominance and hegemonic oppression, an urgent and inevitable need is felt for resistance by the oppressed sections of society. The act of resistance demands not just the power of arms to win the power holds but also the power of the mind to confront and battle against the hegemonic oppression and violence. The movements of resistance have a goal to get rid of the dominant, conventional orthodox institutions of society. The literature of resistance is a specific genre to make people conscious of the ground reality and to make them raise their voice against the oppression and injustice prevalent in the society.

The concept of resistance has its origins in the field of culture and politics. Resistance, according to *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* is defined as, "dislike of or opposition, to a plan, an idea etc., refusal to obey 'or 'the act of using force to oppose somebody or something". Resistance, thus, carries the sense of refusal, denial or rejection of anything which seems to be unjustified and illogical. The main aim of resistance is to bring some changes in the established set-up. Basically, resistance is not conflictive; it actually takes place through apparently minor day-to-day activities of defiance and achieves the required solutions progressively. The term 'resistance' has been variously defined as "active efforts to oppose, fight, and refuse to cooperate with or submit to ...abusive behavior and...control." (Profit 25) Rose Weitz has defined resistance as "actions that not only reject subordination but do so by challenging the ideologies that support that

subordination.” (670) In the words of Tonny Bennet, “Resistance is an essentially defensive relationship to cultural power that is adapted by subordinate social forces in circumstances where the forms of cultural power in question arise from a source that is clearly experienced as external and other.” (171) Thus, resistance emerges from relationship of power and subordination where a dominating culture is seeking to impose itself on subordinate cultures. Consequently, sources of resistance are to be located in some measure outside the dominating culture.

Resistance, in its most prominent sense refers to different kinds of protest or revolutionary movements. Not only does it entail physical opposition to injustice, but is also internal and psychological. Sometimes, maintaining silence can be a kind of resistance whereas, at other times, breaking silence can also be taken as an act of resistance. In this way resisting something openly or maintaining silence have the potentiality to question and confront the authority. Resistance can take place individually or collectively. It can confine to one place or can spread at any level in the society. The protest movements generally need cooperation within the groups but some resistance acts e.g. choosing a particular style and working place does not require any kind of cooperation between the groups.

Sometimes, resistance can be visible or recognizable as resistance e.g. the large scale protest movements and revolutions are visible and recognized as acts of resistance because their members confront their targets directly and openly. James Scott, a political scientist, however, challenged this concept and drew attention to “everyday resistance”. As Scott says that weaker sections of the society hardly ever get the chance to oppose their super-ordinates directly and, therefore, protest at mass level is only a nine days wonder. Scott talks about the common weapons of the common people who are actually powerless and can resist only through sometimes actions like dragging their feet, slandering or sabotaging etc. According to Scott, “Everyday acts of resistance make no headlines” but these routine activities can still be qualified as acts of resistance to some extent as they “deny or mitigate claims made by appropriating classes”. (302)

Most of the resistance movements head towards accomplishing objectives that they focus on. These movements generally plan to bring a change in the existing tyranny of the authoritative groups in the socio-cultural and political space. The

resistance consistently focuses on the social, political and cultural scenario of a country to bring change in the hegemonic ideology. This type of resistance of the dejected and aggrieved section or society or nation cannot be regarded as the violation of human rights. It is rather meant for the progression of mankind. In Usha Bande's words resistance "... involves reinterpretation so as to bring the marginalized to the center; it also recognizes the need to 'hear voices and give consideration to the dispossessed.'"(1)

In her book '*Writing Resistance*', Usha Bande differentiates between resistance literature and the literature which gives expression to resistance. She points out that only such works of literature should be included in the category of resistance literature which are revolutionary in nature. Such works that only serve as an expression of resistance in the society but lack the revolutionary character must not be included in the category of resistance literature. Literature can be an arena where the marginalized section can give voice to their resistance against the centre. Literature creates awareness among the marginalized ones and illuminates the sufferings of the minorities. Usha Bande says, "Literature voicing resistance need not necessarily be revolutionary in character. To oppose a system of power or to question the validity of a tradition at linguistic level, does not axiomatically herald social and material change."(8)

Resistance can be revealed through silence or through voice, or by means of weapons: hard weapon or even pen as a weapon. As a general truth, "the pen is mightier than the sword". So, writing is equally mightier than the martial efforts made against hegemony. Resistance literature is thus a writing which resists domination and wishes to change the prevalent situation to create a possibility of empowerment. Barbara Harlow writes in her book *Resistance Literature*,

The struggles for national liberation and independence have not only sought socio-economic control and cultural domination but have also produced a significant corpus of literary writing, narrative and poetic; as well as broad spectrum of theoretical analysis of the political ideologies and cultural parameters of this struggle. (xii)

In any society, dominant and subordinated classes, as well as their ideologies and narratives of the past and present, do not exist in isolation but in conflict. Thus,

the ideology that serves the interests of one group subverts the interest of the others. The subordinate classes everywhere do not share the dominant ideology and history doled out by the elites, and, therefore, have traditions and ideologies of resistance. Master narratives and dominant ideologies often inhibit and confuse the traditions and ideologies of resistance. Thus, where on one hand, the relationship among the different classes of society results in class conflicts, on the other hand, it becomes the motivating force behind various social revolutions where class consciousness may have no role to play. These protests and revolutions contribute in reshaping and restructuring the social institutions. Traditionally, hegemony can be defined as dominance of one political group over the other at political level. Marxists broadened the meaning of hegemony to include power struggle between different classes at social level. According to Raymond Williams, because of the inequalities between the classes in an actual society, there is a domination and subordination which is to be identified as a social process. "It is in just this recognition of the wholeness of the process that the concept of hegemony goes beyond 'ideology'." (108) This sense of ideology is applied to the consciousness of the dominant and the subordinated classes in an abstract way. Where the dominant classes have it in an abstract form, the subjugated classes have it in their consciousness or imposed on their otherwise different consciousness. If the pressures and limits of this domination are experienced and internally practiced, then the total concept of hegemony and the resistance to it undergoes transformation. Antonio Gramsci emphasizes the need to create a reciprocal hegemony in a form of struggle or a revolutionary activity in response to the oppression of the existing one which actually springs from the working class. Gramsci viewed hegemony as a complex process. He says,

"A lived hegemony is always a process...It is a realized complex of experiences, relationships, and activities, with specific and changing pressures and limits...It has continually to be renewed, recreated, defended, and modified. It is also continually resisted, limited, altered, and challenged by pressures not at all its own. We have then to add to the concept of hegemony the concept of counter- hegemony and alternative hegemony, which are real and persistent elements of practice."(112)

In his famous essay, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatus", Louis

Althusser establishes that “ideology is the fulcrum of the state mechanism through which the dominant class is able to reproduce its class domination. Moulded into subjects through ideological state apparatuses, succeeding generations continue to conform to the norms of the existing class relations.” (122) In other words, the prevailing ideology unites the hegemonic class and undermines the subjugated sections by denying them a basic comprehension of any philosophy of dissent that can empower them to transform the society to make it more egalitarian. The hegemonic ideology makes sure that the subjugated sections fail to understand the dominant ideology, so that they can never rise to engage themselves in a revolution for freedom from the class-based discrimination. However, the crux of the Marxist-Gramscian dialectic is that the dominant ideas are never fully accepted. Ultimately, they are challenged by the deprived and the degraded.

This hegemonic power gets dismantled by the counter-hegemonic forces of the social protest movements. The concept of hegemony as Gramsci describes is that the dominant group subjugates the marginalized one by using both coercive and persuasive forces. “Hegemony is a relation between classes and other social forces. A hegemonic class or part of a class is one which gains the consent of other and social forces through creating and maintaining a system of alliances by means of political and ideological struggle.” (Simon 22) Hegemony is not a process of dominating the other but of getting consent. The dominance of the capitalist class is a result of an ideological relationship between the dominant and the subjugated. In a capitalist society, the capitalist class uses the cultural forces to preserve their dominance. Rather than resorting to violent methods the capitalist class makes use of the cultural ideology to maintain order and generate the ethical standards in such an effective manner that they seem to become the common sense value of all. Gramsci is of the view that the dominant classes maintain their dominance by making use of consent and avoiding use of coercion till the last step. Most people accept the social events as the normal happenings necessary to run the society but there is a possibility of their retaliating against these very normal processes and looking for reforms. In order to snap this relationship, the subaltern group has to develop counter-hegemony. Therefore, the prevailing conflict between hegemony and counter-hegemony contributes in shaping and structuring both of them. “If the working class is to achieve hegemony, it needs patiently to build up a network of alliances with these social

movements; and the process of building these alliances is an essential part of war of position.” (45)

Counter-hegemony does not begin as a radicalism or extremism. It, rather, results from efforts from the counter-hegemonic sections to persuade the masses to express their views against the hegemonic strategies and to make them aware of their oppressive ideology. Gramsci gives a lot of credit to the marginalized sections, intellectuals and revolutionaries being responsible for social transformation. Gramsci believes that intellectuals have a significant role in the development of counter-hegemonic forces. He mentions the two different categories of intellectuals whom he calls traditional intellectuals and organic intellectuals. Gramsci writes, “Since these various categories of traditional intellectuals [administrators, scholars and scientists, theorists, non-ecclesiastical philosophers, etc.] experience through an *esprit de corps* their uninterrupted historical continuity, and their special qualifications, they thus put themselves forward as autonomous and independent of the dominant social group....” (7-8) Traditional intellectuals seem to have an independent consciousness of their own which is not influenced in any manner by the dominant class of the society. Their ideology seems to have a semblance to the historical continuum despite all the social upheavals. The clergies, men of letters, philosophers and professors come under this category. They believe that they are totally free of the classes but actually, they happen to assist them.

Organic intellectuals play a very crucial role in the society. They are the product of education system. They work as agents of the ruling class and, thus, assist in maintaining their hegemony over the other social groups. They give expression to the otherwise unexpressed feelings of the common people. They explain things in a scientific way and logical manner while using the language of culture as their means of communication. Organic intellectuals are very instrumental in the class struggle for hegemony. According to Gramsci, creating a social consciousness among the masses was not for bringing about social transformation. In fact, social transformation could be possible only when the existing consciousness was challenged and finally transformed. Thus, the transformation of the social consciousness, according to Gramsci, would be a pre-requisite for the creation of a counter-hegemonic class. This counter-hegemonic class would include organic intellectuals extracted out of the working classes which have participation in the real life. The organic intellectuals

who emerge from the working classes would, thus, not be much distant from the actual day-to-day life like the theorists who seem to inhabit a world which has no connection with the world of the common people. This amalgamation of theory and practice, in the form of working class intellectuals, Gramsci insists, was a must for transforming the ideology of the masses. These working class organic intellectuals would also serve the purpose of winning over a number of traditional intellectuals who would then assist in the development of counter-hegemonic resistance in the society, thus contributing to the cause of social transformation.

Gramsci allowed for the possibility of effective protest, dissent and resistance against dominant ideologies and hegemony. The counter-hegemonic resistance has been used as a fortified base to understand medieval Bhakti poetry. The Bhakti movement became a symbol of protest, dissent and reform. As reform movements have often gained ground depending upon the existing circumstances and have reflected the aspirations and desires of the common man. The Bhakti movement brought forth the existing resentment against the existing social order and gave vent to the feelings of new classes and castes that were emerging by that time. In the beginning, the Bhakti movement was being taken as a literary movement inspired by religion but this movement had turned out not only as a religious movement but also as a social protest and resistance movement under the rubric of religion, since religion was one of the sanctioned ways of protest.

The use of ideology as a weapon for the purpose of maintaining hegemony, of ensuring the adherence by the masses to the dominant ideology could also be found at the basis of the Brahmanic system. Brahmins, being the topmost class in the social hierarchy, represented the ruling hegemonic class in orthodox Indian social system. In this system, the Brahmanic caste-based ideology became the tool to maintain dominance over the masses. Brahmins did the intellectual and religious work for the ruling classes. They were responsible for the creation of the structure of the society and religion, but on the other hand they also legitimated the oppression of the working classes. M.S.A Rao discusses the philosophy of the dissent movements and shows how these revolutions were to a great extent distinguished by their concern with religious beliefs and practices. He says, "Brahmanical Hinduism had established a monopoly over the paths of salvation and denied the common man access to them. The path of devotion provided the double edged ideology of establishing equality of

all men in relation to God on one hand and attacking the monopoly and supremacy of certain sections of Brahmans over Vedic knowledge and action on the other.” (59-60)

The essence of religion, in both Hinduism and Islam, lay in the performance of rituals and ceremonies while being guided by an external authority. In Islam, this authority lay with the Quran and was exercised by the Qazis. In Hinduism, the authority was given to Brahmins who presided over various ceremonial rites while ensuring that the force of the caste system prevailed and the boundaries of the caste were never transcended. This traditional authoritarian system, common to both Hinduism and Islam has not received universal acceptance and has been challenged by a number of socio-religious movements. Three such movements viz. *Vaishnava* Bhakti, Tantric Yoga and Sufism proved to be quintessential in developing counter-hegemonic resistance against the traditional religious system. *Vaishnava* Bhakti originated in Southern India and later spread to the Northern regions. Religious ‘love’ was the key element in ‘Bhakti’ and one of the *avatars* of Lord Vishnu used to be the receiver of this spiritual love. Tantric Yoga was represented by the Nath-Yogis who were active during this period in the North. The third dissenting movement of Sufism also challenged the caste system and contributed a lot in modifying the religious sentiments of Hindus and Muslims.

The Sant tradition was predominantly a combination of *Vaishnava* Bhakti, *Tantric-Yoga* and Sufism. Most of the elements in Sant tradition were borrowed from Vaishnavism, Tantriks and with a marginal influence of the Sufi Tradition. In many ways, the Bhakti Saints did not follow the traditional way of bhakti and there were a number of conceptual diversions from the traditional bhakti. They did not offer their love to an incarnation of God but directly to the Almighty. They expressed their love by means of devotional meditation. This method of bhakti was not easy as it was full of pain and difficulties.

The Bhakti Movement in medieval Northern India started as a protest against orthodoxy. The nature and scope of the movement was almost the same as that of Sufism. But, whereas Sufism did not go against Islam, Quran and Prophet, the bhakti as particularly those of *Nirguna* School, emerged as a reaction against Hinduism and Brahmanism. It was, in fact, due to the long-term socio-religious bias and humiliation faced by the people of lower strata that spiritual leaders of this class not only resisted

the religious system of traditional Hinduism but also took the leadership in their own hands and broke the religious monopoly of the Brahmins.

This reaction against the priestly class, religious dogmatism, the caste system and the discrimination between the higher and the lower classes which happened to be the key feature of the Bhakti poetry expressed the opposition to the feudalist ideology. This feeling of rebellion against the feudal ideologies had a revolutionary significance in its own historical context. The iniquitous economic distribution, economic gains and opportunities of life had been dominating the social canvas of the medieval Indian society. The exploitation of the poor working classes by the rich had been the order of the time. The awareness of the medieval poets of these disparities and their reaction to them found ample expression in their works. Resistance is not necessarily directing people, telling them what to do but enable them to make their own choices. Thus, the saint-poets have not only recorded the factual statements of social disparities and social evils in their works, but have also attempted to strike awareness in the masses for the eradication of these vices.

Like saint-poetry, the legends and miracles associated with these Bhakti Saints are also treated as symbolic forms of resistance. Hagiographic accounts of the lives of saints have important implications for understanding the nature of power and dominance at various levels. The Saint Poetry and the stories of the lives of these Saints are highly didactic and suffused with various conflicts and counter-hegemonic designs. According to the hagiographic tales, most of the legends associated with Sant Kabir and Guru Ravi Dass represent them as defiant religious heroes who suffered at the hands of religious authorities, officials and rulers for their acts of religious transgression and subversion. The Saints were believed to have divine powers and they were regarded as charismatic religious heroes who challenged the established authorities of their times. “The Sants, endowed with supernatural powers, ultimately overcame the opposition of their adversaries who accepted their greatness and sometimes even became their followers.” (Bahuguna 237) It is evident from the legends and stories that the common people remember the great Bhakti Poets as anti-brahmanical religious heroes rather than as propagators of uncompromising monotheism. It was not so much the monotheism-polytheism dichotomy that shaped the consciousness of the people, but the inspirational lives of the great saints.

The legends offer historical explanation of how these religious movements arose and how their traditions were preserved, in the face of adversity. The legends also justify the protest against the asymmetrical relation of power that prevailed in the society. The legends are manifestation of a socio-religious ideology. The main intention of these legends is to protest against social discrimination and economic exploitation rather than legitimizing the existence of institutes of domination. The legends manifest the ideology of the poor and the powerless, not the rich and the powerful. Miracles attributed to the Saints were in fact the common people's way of overcoming their own social predicaments. The kind of opposition which is reflected in the poetry and hagiographical tales of these Saints had political implications. The Brahminical elite rationalized the domination of ruling classes in religious terms. The popular legends and miraculous stories of these Saints are indicative of the fact that subordinate groups perceived Brahmins, Qazis and rulers as constituting a single oppressive system of rule. They were aware of the fact that the Brahmins and Qazis were enforcing the social control and religious norms with the help of the rulers. They understood the state not in abstract or institutional terms but as an oppressive alliance of rulers, Brahmins and Qazis. The consciousness that the rulers considered religious conformism necessary for political stability is present in the legendary representations of the lives of these saints. The legends present these Saints as persons of religious exaltation and glorification. They are established as conquerors of rulers and Brahmins. The narrators and listeners of these stories seem to revel in their desire to ridicule, criticize and ultimately overturn the religious hierarchy. The subordinate social groups claim to use sacred objects, myths and symbols that were regarded as a brahmanical monopoly.

On one hand, the Bhakti poetry mirrors the social changes that took place during that period, it, on the other hand, is capable of becoming the source of inspiration to bring about a social revolution. Even the mysticism of the saint-poets has expressed an idea of an egalitarian social order as an alternative to the tyrannical feudal system. The saint-poets clearly drew a distinction between the land of Brahmins and rulers and the land of Saints. The Brahmanical land was characterized by the *Vedas*, caste-based discriminations, religious sects, old age death, pain and doubts. The land of Saints contained no such evils. It was without any sorrow. No taxes were imposed on the people there. The land was free from fear, crime and

scarcity. God was the eternal emperor and the Saints and virtuous people were His courtiers. The imagined country of the Bhakti Saints, 'Begumpura', was not an exclusive other world, different from the real world. Not entering in to a direct confrontation with a prevalent feudal system, these saint-poets skillfully interpreted the system and attributed new meaning and significance to it. For instance, Guru Ravi Dass projected the image of God in the form of a king who like all earthly kings, lives in his capital 'Begumpura', where all the luxuries and prosperities of life were at His command. Claiming himself to be His subject and slave, Ravi Dass elevated himself to the status of His courtier and thus emerged fearless of the social prejudice. The contention is that the poetry of the medieval Saints powerfully embodies the protest of the society in general and of the downtrodden in particular, against the existing feudal oppression, inequitable economic distribution and the evils of the caste system. Jayant Lele argues persuasively

“A tradition such as the bhakti movement contains seemingly contradictory elements of hegemony, oppression, and liberation all at once: the hegemony of tradition, the embodiment of this hegemony in an oppressive social order, and yet the existence within this tradition of liberating, dissident, and reformist elements as well.” (as Quoted by Lorenzen 105)

While some of the scholars have clearly recognized the competing hegemonic and reformist aspects of the bhakti tradition, most scholars of this tradition have tended to emphasize its egalitarian aspects, which are regarded as nurturing social reforms and helping to remove the inherent tensions found in the hierarchical caste system in Indian society.

The modern society has witnessed several forms of agitation and protest, ranging from strikes and fasts to rebellion and mutiny. Gandhiji developed the technique of non-violent protest known to us as *Satyagrah*. In the same way, the social protest and resistance in the poetry of these Sants is free from the spirit of violence, or ill-will against any kind of authority, or bad faith in general. In a few instances, the protest is loud, vociferous and altogether convincing. These Bhakti Poets have participated in the peoples' struggle and put up resistance to oppressions of all kinds. In their poetic protest, they voice the feelings and urge of the lowly and downtrodden, the exploited and oppressed sections of the society.

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CHAPTER-3

JAATI NA PUCHHO SAADHU KI: KABIR BANI

Jaati Na Puchho Saadhu Ki

Poochh Lijiye Gyan:

Mol Karo Tarwar Ka

Pada Rehne Do Myan

Kabir, the medieval Indian saint-poet, the adi-sant, the mystic, is a name that demands no introduction. Kabir's popularity has stood the test of the times and the niche that he carved for himself in the hearts of his Hindu as well as Muslim followers has only been widened and deepened through the centuries. Even in the twenty-first century, he remains not only the champion of the downtrodden, but also a reverent figure for the elite intellectuals of India. His poetry full of practical wisdom has won global acclaim. His ardent efforts to free Indian society from the shackles of religious orthodoxy and caste-based discrimination make him a great social reformer of all times. As a mystic poet, a theologian, a social satirist and as a critic of orthodox religion, Sant Kabir ranks among the topmost poets of the world whose contribution towards the transformation of medievalism into modernity can never be underrated.

In the course of the twentieth century, Kabir has come to be construed as an individual author in the modern sense of the term, and to occupy a position of primacy in the history of Indian literature and religion.

He is widely regarded as the first major poet in the Hindi language as the earlier author of the Bhakti Movement in Hindi literature, and as the *adisant*, the first and predominant figure in the *Sant Parampara* of North India, a multifaceted tradition of philosophical, theological and social argument that began to dismantle the structures of Classical Hinduism around the Fifteenth century, and to replace them with a new architecture. (Dharwadker xii)

Sant Kabir has emerged as a legendary figure in the Bhakti Movement in North India. Like all wandering saint-poets and prophets, his birth, parents and

personal life is surrounded by mystery, myths and legends. There is a lot of uncertainty regarding the particulars of Kabir's biography. The whole issue of Kabir's life is hotly contested. Whatever is described about his life is all mythical and hagiographical. Vaudeville says, "The most ancient and reliable testimonies, as we have seen, do not throw any light on Kabir's life; they rather stress his extraordinary personality and express a certain amount of perplexity about his teachings." (65) As soon as we start historicizing Kabir, we involve ourselves in legends. There seems to be uncertainty and confusion about Kabir's life and works because of the general dearth of information about him, partly because he himself, being an unlettered person, left nothing in written form. "The legends about Kabir's life contain ideological 'messages' that have their own historical importance, independent of whether or not the stories tell us what actually happened." (Lorenzen 182)

There is volume of legends about the birth of Kabir. As Underhill observes, "Some of these emanate from a Hindu, some from a Mohammedan source, and claim him by turns as a Sufi and a Brahmin Saint. His name, however, is practically a conclusive proof of Moslem ancestry." (viii) The tradition claims that a Brahmin widow whose consort was unknown gave an unnatural birth to Kabir in Magahar. For fear of social humiliation she abandoned the child near a tank at Lahartara in Varanasi. The weaver couple named Neeru and Neema took pity on the disowned infant and took him home. They lavished all love and affection on the child since they did not have any issue. Though Kabir showed scant interest in his profession as a business, he lived and died as a weaver. It is important to mention here that weavers, or *julahas*, the creators of the fabled Indian textiles, were organized into guilds. They enjoyed a respectable position in the society and many of them were Buddhists. But after their absorption in the orthodox caste system, their systematic degradation as a low caste began. In Kabir's time, his community was treated contemptuously by the elite. The proud *julahas* never reconciled to their social humiliation, and when they got an opportunity, they revolted against the priestly-feudal order of Hindu society by embracing Islam in the age of Delhi Sultanate. But the entry into the religion of the ruling Muslims did not solve their problems as their social position remained by and large the same. Snubbed by the feudal-aristocratic Muslim ruling class, their need for social dignity and religio-cultural recognition remained a distant dream.

It is also believed that Neeru belonged to the *Natha* sect who specialized in Yogic practices. It was as such in his cultural upbringing that Kabir derived his immense knowledge in Yogic system which embodies the recurring theme of most of his poems. There has been an endless controversy and debates regarding the actual or Muslim parents and exact date of Kabir's birth. According to the Kabir-Panthi literature and Hindu tradition, Kabir is supposed to have been born in 1398 and died in 1518. This lengthy life span of Kabir associates him with renowned religious and historical personages such as Ramnanda, Guru Nanak and Sikander Lodhi, although no link in fact can be established. As Vaudeville points out:

The whole controversy over Kabir's dates appears to be linked with the Saint's Hindu biographers' conviction that Kabir was Ramnanda's actual disciple and also he was persecuted by Sikander Lodhi in person. Some authors, influenced by Sikh popular beliefs, also wanted to make Kabir a contemporary of Guru Nanak... Yet there is no historical evidence – not even any probability. (54)

Kabir is generally believed to be an illiterate and he composed most of his verses orally which were later on collected by his disciples and admirers. Though his inability to read or write and his ignorance with pen or paper cannot be proved but it is accepted that he insisted on oral transmission. "Being a man of the people, a poor artisan, Kabir could hardly have had any formal religious training: what he knew, he knew from experience or from hearing alone." (94) He has also been called a '*bahusrut*', one who had heard much. Living in and around Kashi, the citadel of learning, Kabir must have been in constant contact with holy men of his times. Jaunpur and Jusi, sacred to Eastern Muslims and residence of many *Pirs* and *Shaikhs*, were also not far away. Though Kabir could hear what all those 'holy men' had to say, yet he appeared to stand alone and he cordially despised them. Through his oral transmission, he reflected the deepest religious aspirations of his time in a very striking way. The loftiness of his mind and the depth of his spiritual awareness had made him impervious to the theological arguments and squabbling. He contemptuously rejected most of their doctrines and practices. Kabir's *Sadhna* (*bhakti*) is very much his own though it is not exempted from the inner contradictions. He stressed on the direct association with the *guru* and stipulated that genuine and

veritable knowledge is only the word that the *guru* speaks. He never followed any other guidance than that of the interior Master, the divine *Satguru*. Kabir says:

I do not read learned books
Nor do I know how to debate
I have gone mad
Hearing and speaking
the virtues of Hari. (Raga Bilawal 2, Dass 176)
(Bidhia Na Parau Baadh Nahi Jaanu
Har Gun Kathat Sunath Bauranu.)

Though illiterate, Kabir had the rare faculty and the exceptional ability to articulate his iconoclastic ideas of life and religion. He consciously put to use his experiences, observation, and intellect as ultimate in forming a philosophy of life and a world view in an age dominated by orthodoxies of all kinds. “It is on account of this scientific temper coupled with the rare courage of conviction that he dared to reject with supreme confidence the solutions offered by tradition and *Shastra*.” (Mani 144) He addressed his implacable orthodox adversaries and claimed that his criteria for assessing reality was his own observation, *ankhin ki dekhi*, while the shifty eyed *Pundit* took recourse to writing on paper, *kaagad ki lekhi*, to pull wool over people’s eyes. He writes:

I touch not ink nor papaer,
Nor take pen in my hand
Of the greatness of the four ages
Kabir has given instructions
With his lips. (Bijak, Sakhi 188, Shah 202)
(Masi Kagad Chhouh Nahi / Kalam Gaho Nahi Hath,
Chaaron Jug Ke Mahatam / Kabira Mukhai Jnai Baat)

Kabir’s claim that he “never touched ink or paper”, is often taken as a mark of his illiteracy. Actually it is an ironical fling at the scholars who read scriptures or write pedantic statements on God and religion but know nothing about them. Their

knowledge, like sandal-load on a donkey's back, is of no use to them. According to Kabir, knowledge is an awareness of the self. The scriptures point to the path, but are not the path. Kabir may or may not have studied the scriptures, but he had definitely felt them on his pulse. His approach to life was scientific. He accepted nothing without observation and experimentation. "He dismisses all indirect evidence in favour of direct perusal. In this process, he rules out the presence of Rama or even the supreme reality when he says, "How can I know Ram, I never saw him." (Singh, Kedarnath 111)

The circumstances of Kabir's upbringing make it quite clear that he was unable to read and write. He had no formal education. Belonging to the subaltern class recently converted to Islam, Kabir could read neither the Sanskrit *Vedas* and *Upanishads* nor the Arabic *Koran*. But as a bright subaltern boy, he had a general knowledge of what both religions said. Kabir has also written stories such as *Adam* and *Havva* (the Arabic names of Adam and Eve). It seems that Kabir was familiar with the rituals and externalities of Islam as he was with the popular *Puranic* stories of the *avatars*, the well known sexual symbols of *Nath-Sidhas*, and the Sufi tradition. He refers to his provincial dialect as unintelligible to many:

My speech is of the East;
No one can understand me,
Only he can understand me,
Who is from the furthest East. (Sakhi 194, Shah 203)
(Boli Hmari Purab Ki / Hamen Lakhe Nahi Koi,
Hum Ko To So Hi Lakhe / Jo Dhur Poorab Ka Hoyal)

The mass of learning that Kabir displays in his poetry might have its sources in his coming across men of learning of various religions, sects and schools.

Kabir seems gifted with a sensitive ear, retentive memory and a receptive mind. His acquisition and assimilation of knowledge and wisdom compared to Shakespeare's too had 'little Latin less Greek'. Though Kashi remained the centre of his activities, he travelled far and wide... Those travels were the source of his knowledge, wisdom, and experience and word power. (Karki xvi)

The verses of Kabir have reached the masses through the oral tradition, from the lips of the devotees, from the wandering monks and ascetics and group of singers who walked from place to place. As Vaudeville and Partin remark:

Kabir belongs to that first generation of “Hindi” language that composed couplets and songs for the people in a language which they understood: a mixed Hindi dialect, a kind of dialectical potpourri which is not amenable to the classification of the linguists. This jargon was first used by the innumerable itinerant preachers who at the time, as from all antiquity, traversed the country in all directions. (191)

F.E.Keay gives further details and says:

It seems most unlikely that Kabir could read and write; but his admirers and followers treasured up his poems and repeated them to one another, and perhaps in some cases wrote them down. Then when the KabirPanth was definitely organized, the need for an authoritative scripture was probably felt, and steps taken to collect the various verses of Kabir together. This collection is known as the Bijak. The compiler may have been Bhagwan Das, and the compilation was not made till somewhere about 1600. (56)

Tradition claims that Kabir was the disciple of Ramananda, a *Vaishnava* reformer, whose thought affected mystical concepts in Northern India. Ramanuja, the great twelfth century reformer started a great amelioration in the South which was carried forward by Ramananda to North India. Underhill points out:

This revival was in part a reaction against the increasing formalism of the orthodox cult, in part an assertion of the demands of the heart as against the intense intellectualism of the Vedanta philosophy, the exaggerated monism which that philosophy proclaimed. It took in Ramanuja’s preaching the form of an ardent personal devotion to God Vishnu, as representing the personal aspect of the Divine Nature: that mystical “religion of love” which everywhere makes its appearance at certain level of spiritual culture, and which creeds and philosophies are powerless to kill. (v-vi)

Ramananda shed the use of Sanskrit in favour of the vernacular, made the Hindu God accessible to the common man, by bringing Him out of the Brahmin dominated temple and installing Him in the heart of all humanity.

According to the famous legend, Kabir became a *Vaishnava* by receiving the *Ram-mantra* from Ramananda when by mistake the latter fumbled on Kabir on the steps of Ganges and uttered: “Ram, Ram!” But Kabir in his verses has never suggested that he has received the Name of Rama from any one. It is also believed that the name ‘Rama’ was also used in Yogic sects to designate the Supreme Being or the Supreme Reality. Kabir also says that in his times, Muslims called God ‘*Khuda*’ and the Hindu called Him ‘Rama’. The name ‘Ram’ was the most common way for Hindus to refer to the Supreme Divinity. The fact remains that Kabir never mentioned a human *guru* in his verses and he extols the ‘Name’ (of God) without ever referring to the divinized god Rama of the *Ramayana* epic.

Whether Kabir was a part of Ramananda’s physical time, or just belonged to his spiritual time as a disciple distanced in spatial time, cannot be said for sure. According to the sources, there is a clear mention of Kabir’s name amongst the twelve leading disciples of Ramnanda. On the other hand, William Dwyer is of the opinion that they were not contemporaries. He writes, “Kabir was most probably not a disciple of Ramananda, but if, as is likely enough, Ramananda had a deep influence on Bhakti practice in the century preceding Kabir’s time, then some indirect influence of his thought on Kabir could legitimately be sought.” (217) According to David Lorenzen, there is hardly any similarity and relationship between Ramananda and Kabir. After all, why would a champion dissenter like Kabir, who had nothing but contempt for the Brahmanical culture and religion trick a Brahmin into accepting him as a disciple? Dharamveer is also of the opinion that Brahmanical scholarship concocted Kabir’s connection with Ramananda in order to blunt his attack on Brahmanism.

Kabir along with other *Nirguna Sants* of the Bhakti movement were influenced by *Siddhas* and *Nath-Yogis*. These Nath and Siddhas had their mystical experience from their own experience. It was from these Nath-Yogis that Kabir inherited the concept of deriving spiritual knowledge directly from the Almighty *Satguru* in the form of *Sabda*, the mysterious sound, which could be heard through inner spiritual experience without the intervention of a physical or worldly *guru*.

Kabir did not believe in any formal performance of ritualistic rights and ceremonies to attain salvation. He imparted an idea that salvation could only be achieved by bhakti and believing in personal God. Nabhadass has made an important statement about Kabir in his *Bhakatmala*. He says:

Kabir refused to acknowledge caste distinction or to recognize the authority of the six schools of Hindu Philosophy, nor did he set any store by four divisions of life prescribed for Brahmins. He held that religion without Bhakti was no religion at all and that asceticism, fasting and almsgiving had no value if unaccompanied by worship. By means of *Ramainis*, *Shabdass* and *Sakhis*, he imparted religious instruction to Hindus and Turks alike. He showed no partiality to either but gave teaching beneficial to all. With determination he spoke and never tried to please the world. Kabir refused to acknowledge caste distinction and the six realms of Philosophy. (*Bhakatmal (mul)*, *Chappay* 60 p 479) (as quoted by Vaudeville 43)

The description of Kabir by Nabhadass mostly relies on negatives and on his rejection of hegemonic traditions. It is this negation that Linda Hess sees as most characteristic of Kabir. She writes:

Kabir is famous for his solitariness, vigour, fearlessness and iconoclasm; for his swift and original mind that pierces dark places with sudden probes of light and finds a natural idiom in paradox and obscure metaphors... [He] shouts and attacks, challenges and teases...is strong and self reliant, dares everyone to be strong and self reliant, and never takes a stance that emphasizes the individual's weakness and impotence... (Hess, TKC 139)

Kabir is regarded as a non conformist who seems to belong to both religions but he never identified himself with either Hindu or Muslim traditions. The central truth of Kabir's teaching is that there is no way to see him as a Hindu or a Muslim exclusively. He does not identify himself as a Muslim or as a Hindu. The only identification given by him is that of a 'weaver of Benaras.' There are many scholars who do not see Kabir as a Hindu or Muslim, but they see him only as bhakti-reformer. A.B. Pandey opines:

The Bhakti reformers before Kabir recognized the need of reform in the prevailing social order of those times but they could not or did not take the revolutionary steps of scrapping the existing social order altogether and replacing it with new order. They were only reformers but not revolutionaries. But Kabir wanted to revolutionize the existing social order and social values root and branch. For this reason, Kabir has attracted the greatest notice. (504-505)

Kabir's greatness lies in trying to abrogate separate Hindu or Muslim identities based on religious grounds. When he says, "I am the son of both Allah and Rama," he specifically means to forsake religious identity. It was an insurmountable task for the two orthodox religions to give up religious identity. But Kabir as a mystic could afford to venture it. "In the life of Kabir the two religions mingled. The strongest elements of each laid hold of him and formed his thought, the Sufi conviction that all ordinary religions are but forms dictating his general attitude to the two faiths. Hence he was persecuted from both sides." (Farquhar 333)

For Kabir, poetry was a means to express his socio-religious and philosophical views and not an end in itself. He was essentially a religious preacher and social reformer. All that he thought and expressed was most original and backed with intense feelings. In stating what was true to his conscience, he compromised with none, even if he had to face severe eventualities in social, religious or political spheres. He refused to salute Siakander Lodhi in his court and said bluntly that he knew only one emperor and that was Lord Rama. He braved courageously the harshest torments he was put to by the infuriated henchmen of the emperor. "His fate has been that of many revealers of reality. A hater of religious exclusivism, and seeking above all things to initiate men into the liberty of the children of God, his followers have honoured his memory by re-erecting in a new place the barriers which he laboured to cast down." (Underhill vi-vii)

Kabir had been the follower of Ramananda for a long time and participated in the scriptural and doctrinal debates with Pundits and *Mullahs* of his times. He did not yield to the conventional pedagogy of the Sufi or the Hindu contemplation. As Underhill observes:

He never adopted the life of the professional ascetic, or retired from the world in order to devote himself to bodily mortifications and the exclusive pursuit of the contemplative life... he knew how to combine vision and industry; the work of his hands helped rather than hindered the impassioned meditation of his heart. Hating mere bodily austerities, he was no ascetic, but a married man, the father of a family ...and it was from out of the heart of the common life that he sang his rapturous lyrics of divine order. Again and again he extols the life of home, the value and reality of diurnal existence, with its opportunities for love and renunciation; pouring contempt upon the professional sanctity of the yogi, who “has a great beard and matted locks, and looks like a goat. (ix-x)

Sant Kabir favoured neither Hindus nor Muslims. His criticism of both religions was equally severe and categorical. Through his poetry he had subverted and criticized religious identities and institutions. He debunked rituals and blind devotion of the established beliefs. He was highly critical of the puffed-up authority and hypocritical religiosity of the Brahmins. He found religious symbols, rites and practices useless. He maintained balance by criticizing both the religions by denouncing any particular rite of one religion and linking it with a similar aspect of the other.

Qazi, what is this Book that you discourse on?

You are jangling and wrangling always: nothing of

Wisdom do you know. (Bijak, Sabda 84, Shah 135)

(Kazi Tum Kon Kitaab Bakhana

Jhakhath Bakat Raho Nish Vasar,

Mat Eko Nahi Jana.)

Kabir was highly offensive and subversive against the ostentations and affectations of sorting out the enigma of the human state by means of scriptures or the commanding authority of the *Vedas* and *Quran*. He chastised the *Pundits* and the

Qazis of his times who tried to resolve the problem of redemption or deliverance by their useless lecturing.

Kabir defied orthodoxy and ridiculed the claim to a divine origin of caste. He not only targeted the *Pundits* or the Brahmins but also had little or no respect for *Mullahs* and *Qazis* who were pompous archetypes of Islamic religion. He mocked the umpteen pretensions of Muslim clerics, and rejected pilgrimage, idolatry, sacrifice, and other such practices with brilliance unprecedented in history. His equal denunciation of the Muslims' custom of circumcision and Hindus' rite of putting on the sacred thread is an example in point. According to Muslim custom and tradition, a boy is circumcised at the age of five or six. According to a famous legend, when Kabir reached the age when he was to be circumcised; he exhibited such strange portents that the Qazi was terrified. On this occasion Kabir says:

Vain-glorious of authority, you make me to be circumcised:

never will I endure it, brother.

If it is God taht makes thee to be circumcised, why

came not this cutting of itself ?

If by circumcision one becomes Turk, what then will

be said of your women ?

Half the body, so the wife is styled: then you still

remain Hindu.

By putting on the sacred thread one becomes a Brahman

What has thou given to women to wear?

She from birth is but a Sudra, why dost thou eat the

Food she brings, O Pande. (Bijak, Sabda 84, Shah 135)

Shakti Na Mano Sunnat Karat Ho / Main Na Badonga Bhai.

Jo Khudaya Tum Sunnat Karat Ha /Aapho Kat Kin Ayi.

Sunnat Kray Turuk Jo Hona / Aurat Ki Kya Kahiye,

Aradhshriri Naar Bakahane / Tatae Hindu Rahiye.

Ghaal Janeu Brahman Hona / Mehri Ko Kya Pehraya.

Voh To Janam Ki Shudrin Parosa / So Tum Pande Kyu Khaya.)

Kabir not only satirised the immorality and frailty of these people but also scorned and ridiculed the systems themselves which they safeguarded and dissembled to constitute.

According to another legend, as a boy, Kabir offended both Hindus and Muslim playmates by crying “Rama, Rama” and “Hari Hari.” At this his Muslim friends called him a *Kafir*. Once he annoyed Brahmins by applying *tilak*, wearing a sacred thread (*Janeyu*) and uttering the name of Lord, *Narain*, as for Brahmins, it was a sacrilege committed by a low caste Muslim. To their protest, Kabir retorted:

In our house

We are forever stretching our thread-

But around your neck you have only one sacrificial thread.

You read the Vedas and recite the Gayatri,

While govind dwells in my heart.

.....

You are a Brahmin, I am a weaver of Benaras:

Can you guess what I really mean?

While you were busy begging from monarchs and rajas,

My thoughts were fixed on Hari. (Raga Asa 26, Dass 142-43)

(Hum Ghar Sooth Tanehi Nit Taanna/ Kanth Janaeu Tumahre

Tum To Baed Parrahu Gayatri/ Govind Ridhai Hamare.

Tu Brahman Mai Kaseek Julaha/ Boojhahu Mor Gyana

Tum To Jaache Bhupati Raje/ Har So Mor Dhayana.)

Kabir denied having any faith in the religious rites of the both the religions. He confronted the Brahmins for wearing the thread around their neck that the spinners were not entitled to wear. Brahmins kept on reading the Vedas and reciting the *Gayatri* Mantra without being able to internalize their relationship with God. In the same way, the secret of heaven is not in the Muslim rites but in the very heart of man. He says:

Worthless the Veda and the Koran!

False is the Koranic Law and the sacred Thread

Neither Turk nor Hindu ever grasped that mystery.

From a mixture of earth and water,

Was this universe born:

When the Sabda is re-absorbed in the void,

What then will caste mean. (Ramaini 10, Vaudeville 154)

(Ved Keteb Bhya Sab Rita/ KaRama Te Sunnat Aur Janeu.

Hindu Turuk Na Jane Bhaeu.

Pani Paun Sanjoye Ke/ Rachiya yeh Utpaat.

Sunahi Surat Samayia/ Kanso Kahiye Jaat.)

Kabir criticized the sway held by the guardians of orthodox theology. He proclaimed the futility of sacred texts which served to create divisions. Kabir was forthright in asserting that various rituals and practices and textual authority were evolved by the privileged classes to control and rule the masses. Emphasis on religious externals perpetuated animosity between adherents of different religions. From this point of view, Islam was not very different from Hinduism. Hence, Kabir loathed both the hypocritical *Mullahs* and the unscrupulous Brahmins and poured scorn over them.

Kabir strongly objected to the slaughtering of cows by Mullahs, for which the Brahmins felt very delighted. At the same time, “he found the sacrifices that priests made to Goddess Kali hideous, and he thought that it was sheerest nonsense to picture God in a succession of animal and human *avatars* whose form could then be worshipped and adored and whose stories could spawn an industry of religious texts, complete with their Brahmin interpreters.” (Hawley and Juergensmeyer 43) In the following verse it is very clear that he did not spare even the Brahmins for offering animal sacrifices to an idol.

You take life

And call it being religious.

Tell me, my brother,

What then is being irreligious?

You call yourself a saint-

Whom do you call

a butcher? (Raga Maru1, Dass 209)

(Jee Badhhu Su DhaRama Kar Thapau/ AdhaRama Kahu Kat Bhai.

Aapas Ko Munivar Kar Thapau/ Ka Ko Kaho Kasai.)

Kabir strongly condemned the ritual sacrifices of cows and other animals for the mere taste of the tongue. He believed that killing or sacrificing in the name of God could not purify anyone’s heart but it only made them cold blooded murderers. According to him, God could not be pleased by killing His creation. Kabir suggested that instead of slaughtering animals, Muslims should kill cruelty of their hearts and with their food they should consume the five demons (lust, greed, egotism, anger and worldly attachments). He preached the principle of *Ahimsa* (non-violence). Slaughtering or so called sacrificing of animals at the altar of religion was an unpardonable sin in his eyes.

The Sant tradition to which Kabir belonged distinguishes itself from the Bhakti movement at large by its complete denial of ritual and idol worship, its

insistence on the formlessness of God and its *Nirguna* Bhakti (which essentially perceives God as formless, one, and universal being). Sant Kabir, the pioneer of the Bhakti movement, is a prominent preacher of *Nirguna* Bhakti. The two prevailing forms of devotion in Hindu religion are *Saguna* and *Nirguna*. The word '*Nirguna*' means without attributes or physical form or shape. The *Nirguna* Bhakti means devotion to one God without any visible object with the spirit to apprehend Him by the inner experience. The word *Saguna* refers to God with physical features and attributes. If the *Saguna* mode of devotion softened the drudgery of the outer rituals with inner love, *Nirguna* rejected the rituals themselves. The former sought the support of the scriptures, the latter relied on experience. The *Saguna* worshipped God as an entity apart from the self (as an idol in the temple), the *Nirguna* found Him pervading within and without.

The *Nirguna* mode suited Kabir's temperament and the needs of his age better than the *Saguna*, though he adopted both and eventually dropped both of them. The *Nirguna* bhakti did not need religious institutions, structures, or priests to be mediators between God and individuals. Kabir was so steadfast in his devotion that he believed that true devotion would itself illumine the devotee's heart with all sorts of knowledge and good actions. He described that true bhakti could not be achieved by formalities. Kabir's religion was totally different. As Hawley and Juergensmeyer remark, "The religion he knows – if religion it is – is of a totally different order from the admonitions and assurances that put bread and butter on the tables of Qaziz and Pundits. His faith is the sort traditionally known as the "qualityless" or "formless" (*Nirguna*) brand of bhakti."⁽⁴²⁾ Kabir accentuated that all human beings had to discern the harmony and the individuality of God the way he had done.

Kabir's way of worshipping God was quite different from the Brahmanic or Vedic way which demanded taking the mind to the 'shunya' by making it free from all thought and passion. But, quite contrary to this, Kabir, like other Sufi (bhakti) poets, worshipped God as a beloved, with all her passion and awaited the union with her lover in marriage. Thus, Kabir made his very passion the instrument of his worship. He sings:

Sing, sing, O maidens, songs of marriage:

Ram, my Husband, has come to my house.

and I will walk around the fire with Rama Rai

my soul suffused with His colour.(Raga Asa 24, Dass 141)

(Rama Rai Siu Bhavar Lahau/ Atam Te Rang Raati.

Gao Gao Ri Dulhani Manglachara,

Mere Ghar Aye Raja Rama Bhtara).

Kabir always deliberated and reprimanded with heartfelt conviction that God is entirely without characteristics. “Kabir’s uniform disdain for Hinduism and Islam reflects his most deeply held conviction that God cannot be named, described, assumed or bound.” (Hawley and Juergensmeyer 41-42) He accepted God as *Parabrahma*, One without any form or name. He was highly influenced by both Vedanta and Sufism in his conception of God. So he asserts:

He alone knows what shape he has

And he keeps it to himself,

Alone. (Hawley 57)

(Jaake Mooh Matha Nahi/ Nahi Roopak Roop.

Puhup Vaas Te Patla/ Aisa Tat Anoop.)

Kabir always spoke and thought with heartfelt conviction about God being formless and entirely without any characteristics. Vinay Dharwadker is of the opinion:

The Kabir poets frequently claim that God is inconceivable and unknowable and that His or Its story is ineffable. They also offer us two other conceptions of their *Nirguna* God: He or It is *nirankar*, completely formless, and also *niranjan*, absolutely pure and flawless without any taint whatsoever. In any one of these conceptions, Kabir poets project God as being indivisible in to attributes, and hence appear to adopt a principle very close to the Quranic principle of God’s ‘unity.’ (78)

Kabir was of the opinion that the whole universe was full of illusions and unreal because it was constituted by forms, shapes, attributes and flaws which seemed real to the human subjects. But infact they were unreal because they were other than God who alone was real whose greatness could not be explained. Kabir says:

If I made the seven seas my ink,
And all the trees of the forest my pen,
And the whole expanse of the earth my paper,
Still I could not write the greatness of Ram!

(Sakhis of Kabir, Vaudeville 177)

(*Saat Samand Masi Karo/ Lekhin Sab Banrai.*

Dharti Sab Kagad Karo/ Tau Har Gun Likhn Na jayi).

Prof. Namwar Singh is of the opinion that the attributeless Rama is not an abstract philosophical concept. Like Maya, the attributeless Rama is also material and real. He says:

The attributeless which shook the foundation of the temple and the mosque, which upset the Brahmin and the *Shaikh* and which brought the credibility of the Veda and the Koran in to question could not be an airy nothing. The attributeless is a kind of ‘knowledge’ that Kabir calls variously an arrow and a sword...The knowledge that is ‘neither Hindu nor Musalman’ that repudiates the difference between the Brahmin and the *Shudra* could be nothing else but without attributes. Thus Kabir attained the courage to deny everything else by accepting the attributeless. (Namwar Singh 91)

The *Nirguna* school of Kabir presented a zestful blend of *nastika* and *astika* elements which were a part of the *astika* and *nastika* traditions of early medieval period. As Krishna Sharma opines, “His religion was based on monistic ideas and an impersonal concept of God which had been part and parcel of the *astika* tradition from the Upanishadic times. But his attitude of questioning the established norms and mores, and of rejecting them by the use of reason, shows the influence of the *nastikas*.

His severe attack on the caste system, idol worship, and ritualism were possible only by adopting the unorthodox spirit of the *nastikas*.” (20)

As it was not possible to describe the formless with the conventional language he forged a new idiom popularly known as *ulatbansi*, ‘upside down speech’, which defies easy comprehension. This paradoxical use of language is sometimes referred to as *sandhya-bhasha*, the ‘twilight language’, the language that mediates, like twilight, between light and darkness. It is contented by J.S. Hawley that Kabir deliberately used this mode of speech “...may be to simply confound listeners who come hoping to learn the sort of religious truth one can write down and file away. These confusing utterances are called Kabir’s “upside-down speech” (*ulatbansi*) because they defy comprehension.” (41) At this P. Mallikarjuna Rao opines:

It may be true that Kabir does so in order to keep away non-genuine seekers, it can be said that by doing so Kabir was only following his medieval fellow saints who deliberately obfuscated their expression to puzzle their readers in order to point out the truth that they were only trying to grapple with an experience that is beyond language. (27)

When Kabir wanted to convey his personal mystical experience, he did it in the paradoxical style which came naturally to him. Kabir took refuge in the language of absurdity or upside-downness, *sandhya-bhasa*, or ‘twilight language’ when he found himself unable to describe what remained forever as inexpressible as ‘the sugar of the mute’.

Child of a childless woman,

A fatherless son,

Someone without feet, who climbs trees,

.....

A flame without a lamp,

A lamp without a flame

An unsounded sound that sounds without end,

Those who comprehend it,

Let them comprehend.

Kabir has gone off into God. (Hawley and Juergensmeyer 57)

(Bhaanjh Ka Poot Baap Bin Jaya/ Bin Paon Tarvar Chadya.

.....

Deepak Bin Jyoti/ Jyoti Bin Deepak.

Had Bin Anahad Sabad Laga.

Chetna Hoyi su Chet Lizo,

For Kabir, the way that led to salvation was not an easy one. It was an abrupt, rugged path which few men could find and fewer could follow. According to Kabir, real bhakti was considered as a heroic path, open only to those men who had renounced all comforts and pleasures and had left behind all desire or hope for bodily salvation and strived for the spiritual meeting at the risk of their life. This intentional hotch-potch of words and concepts by Kabir need not necessarily be viewed as a new challenge to one's intellect. It may be a way – an unorthodox one, of indicating the realms of knowledge that lie beyond intellect. Kabir's *ulatbansis* thus call our attention not so much to their absurd and contradictory nature but to the futility of words to express the experience of the 'Beyond and the Beyond'. The God to whom Kabir directed in his bhakti was not a mere abstraction. In other places, Kabir used attributes to describe Him. He is the savior, merciful, joyous, beautiful, omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent, perfect, etc.

One of the fundamental ideas which Kabir expressed in clear terms is his concept of God. It is often held that under the influence of Sufism, Kabir denounced idolatry, image worship and polytheism and adopted the strong monotheism of Islam. Consequently, he at first taught and emphasized the unity of God. Kabir says:

Brother, whence came two diverse masters of the

world ? Who has led you astray ?

Allah, Rama, Karim, keshva, Hari, Hazrat are but

names that are given.

Jewels and jewels are made of one gold bar: but in it
is one nature only.

Only in speech and hearing two are made- one Namaz,
another Puja.

He is Mahadeva, He Mohammad, and Brahma is called Adam

One is called Hindu, one Turk: both live on the same earth.

One reads the Vedas, another Khutbas, one is Maulvi,
one is pande.

Each is called a separate name;

both are pots of the one clay. (Bijak, Sabda 30, Shah 110)

(Bhai Re! Dui Jagdish Khante Aye/ Kahu Kone Bharmaya.

Allah, Ram, Karim, Keshav/ Hari Hazrat Naam Dharaya.

Gehna ek Kanak Te Gehna/ Tame Bhaav Na Dooja.

Ved Quran Paday Ve Khutva Ve Molana Ve Pande,

Vigat Vigat Ke Naam Dharayu, Yak Maati Ke Bhande.)

Having given a simple description of oneness of God, Kabir tells us that the various denominations of the Almighty are only countenance of one and the same God. Kabir tells that there is only difference in the names. The people belonging to different religions are only different expressions of one substance. Kabir, rather, criticizes the Hindus and the Muslims who conceive of different gods and try to find Him in the world outside rather than looking Him inside their hearts. God, according to Kabir, is there in the very breath of every human being but they don't realize this. Kabir gets upset by the illegitimacy of social institutions. The message given by Kabir is counter-cultural and religiously innovative. The following verse represents his disdain for organized religion. He says:

O Servant, where dost thou seek Me?

Lo! I am beside thee.

I am neither in temple nor in mosque: i am neither in

Kaaba nor in Kailash:

Neither am i in rites and ceremonies, nor in Yoga and

Renunciation

If thou art a true seeker, thou shalt at once see Me: thou

Shalt meet Me in a moment of time

Kabir says, "O Sadhu! God is the breath of all breath."

(Tagore 1)

(Moko Khan Dhoonde Re Bande/ Main To Tere Paas Mein

Naa Main Deval, Naa Main Maszid/ Naa Kaabe Kailaas Mein.

Naa Main Koune Kriyaa KaRama Mein/ Nahini Yog Vairaag Mein.

Khoji Ho To Turaet Mialihe/ Pal Bhar Ki Talaas mein.

Khe Kabir Suno Bhai Saadho/ Sab Swason Ki Swans Mein).

In another place Kabir elaborates the theme of God's omnipresence and condemns the narrow-mindedness of the two communities who strive to confine God to the specific places, where as Kabir asserts that God is all-embracing and omnipresent. Kabir says:

If God lives in the mosque, to whom belong the

remaining country side?

Rama resides in the pilgrim- places and the images:

in neither they have found Him out.

Who said that Vedas and Books are false? They

are false who do not ponder.

Within all bodies One alone is seen: 'tis fear of a
second that destroys.

Whatever, male or female, is created, they are all Thy form.

O Kabir, the son of Allah and of Rama, he is my Guru

And my Pir.

(Bijak, Sabad 97, Shah 142)

(Jo Khudaya Maszid Me Vasat Hai/ Aur Mulak Kehi Kera.

Teerath Murat Raam Nivasi/ Dui Meh Kinuh Na Hera

Poorab Disha Me Har Ko Vasa/ Paschim Allah Mukama,

Dil Me Khoj Dille Me Dekho/ Yeh Karima Rama.

.....

Kabir Pongda Allah Raam Ka/ So Guru Pir Hamara.)

In his religious faith Kabir condemned scathingly the ostentatious display of the Hindus and Muslims indiscriminately. He declared very emphatically that one's own self could free the body from the cycles of birth and death, and not the formal ceremonies of worship in temples and mosques. He says:

Kabir, O Mullah, why do you climb to the minaret?

The lord is not deaf!

Search within your heart for that one,

For whose sake you throw the call to prayer.

(Shloka 184, Vaudeville 312)

(Kabir Mullah Minare Kya Chadya/ Sai Na Behra Hoye.

Ja Kaarn Tu Baangde Dil Hi Bheetar Joye.)

Kabir questioned the reasonableness of central Hindu and Muslim beliefs as well as practices. He also highlighted the pretensions and hypocrisy, and exposed the absurdity of their practices. He attacked the externalized rituals and institutions of both Hinduism and Islam. He condemned all those fasts that were observed by the priests and the Mullahs because God could not be realized by forsaking cereal-food. He made fun of these pretensions as these *Pundits* and *Maulvis* kept fasts only to enjoy the feasts afterwards. At the same time, Kabir did not even approve of killing and chopping of animals in order to satiate the desires of the body. He says:

O Sants, I have seen the way of both.

Hindus and Turks heed no warning: to all the taste of
their desires is sweet.

Hindus kept fast on *Ekadasi* and taste only singharas and milk

They abstain from grain, but do not check the mind's desire:

Next day they eat the flesh of beasts.

Turks keep fast and hours of prayer: they cry aloud
on the name of God.

How will they find Paradise? When evening comes they
Slaughter fowls.

Hindus and Turk, each has renounced his mercy in his heart

One kills by halal, one kills by jhatka: but fire is kindled
in both their houses.

For Hindu and for Turk there is one path, so the
Sat-Guru has taught.

Says Kabir, Listen O Sants: cry 'Rama' cry 'Khuda':

It is one. (Bijak, Sabda 10, Shah 99)

*(Santo Raah Duno Ham Deetha/ Hindu Turuk Hta Nahi Mane.
 Swad Savan Ko Meetha.
 Hindu Varat Ekadshi Sadhe/ Doodh Singhara Seti,
 Ann Ko Tyage Man Nhi Hatke/ Paran Kare Sagoti.
 Turuk Roja Namaj Gujore/ Vismil Baang Pukare,
 Unki Bhisht Kha Te Hoyi Ha/ Sanjhe Murgi Maare.
 Hindu ki dya Mehr Turukan Ki/ Duno Ghatson Tyagi,
 Veh Halal Ve Jhatka Mare/ Aag Duno Ghar Lagi.
 Hindu turuk Ki Ek Raah Ha/ Satguru Hai Btai,
 Khe Kabir Suno He Santo/ Rama Na Kaheu Khudai.)*

By asserting the oneness of God, His omnipresence, Kabir also affirmed that he was neither a Hindu nor a Musalman. He accepted Swami Ramanand's precept of devotion to Rama but his Rama was no human incarnation embedded with five elements. Rama was for him *Nirguna* God. He set aside the tenet of dualism and refused to accept the existence of self and God in separation. For his concept of God, he drew both from Upanishdic non-dualism and the Islamic monism. To make God comprehensible to his followers he added Vaishnavite devotion and love of Sufism. He also laid stress upon repeating the name of God. Although Kabir believed in the unity of God, he used many names for God, but the name which occurred most in his sayings was Rama. "When Kabir speaks of Ram, as he often does, it is not in the *Saguna* sense. He rarely makes a connection between the Rama he speaks of and any of the celebrated acts performed by the Rama who was a form of Vishnu. For Kabir, Rama is merely common coinage for the name of God." (Vaudeville, Vol. 1: 82)

Kabir did not support the idea of polytheism, but on the other hand he wanted people to realize that although there were different names for God, there was only one God. At this R. C. Zaehner says, the "deification of Rama had already gone so far that his name had become a synonym for God." (140) So, in order to remove any doubts or confusion, Kabir gives his conception of Rama in the following way:

He never took birth in King Dashrath's lineage

Nor did he punish the King of Lanka. (Ramaini 2, Vaudeville 148)

(Dashrath Kul Avtar Nhi Aya/ Nhi Lanka Keraya Sataya

The Maker of all did not wed Sita: nor build a bridge

Of stone across the sea

.....

With Gopis and Gwalas He did not come to Gokul:

The Creator did not slay Kansa. (Bijak, Sabda 8, Shah 98)

Sirjanhaar Na Byahi Sita/ Jal Pshaan Nhi Bandha.

.....

Gopi Gwaal Gokul Nhi Aye/ Karte Kans Na Mara.)

Kabir's Rama was not the son of king Dashratha. He rejected the notion of *avatara* of Rama and Krishna. "He sometimes called on God Rama, but qualified this title by excluding Sita or any other companion, and by denying that Rama was himself an *avatara* of God. By 'Rama', he meant not the epic hero, son the of king Dashratha, but the true Guru, the one God, the true Name," (Archer 51-52)

Kabir disapproved the popular superstition that all that died at *Maghar* must be born again as an ass, while death at holy city of Benaras city was sufficient in itself to bring salvation. The Hindus of Kashi held *Maghar* in contempt. *Maghar's* ill repute in opposition to Kashi, a strong hold of orthodox Brahmanism was easily explained by "the prominent association of the place with Buddhism, with Doms, low caste *Sudras*, and also with *Mussalmans*, among whom first came *julahas*." (Mohan Singh 43) In Brahmanical eyes, impure *Maghar* was the very antithesis of holy Kashi, a place of perdition as against a place of salvation. In order to act against this superstitious belief, and to prove it false, when Kabir felt that his end was drawing near, he announced that he was going to *Maghar* to die. Kabir expressed his confidence that it was not the place where a person dwelled and died but the relationship which he had to God that was the all important thing. He says:

For many years I had practiced austerities at Kashi,

But, in death, I have made my dwelling in Magahar.

For him who thinks, Kashi and Magahar are one:

With such scanty devotion, how could men be saved.

(as quoted by Vaudeville 62)

(Sakal Janam Shivpuri Gwaya/ Maran Kaal Maghar Uth Aya.

Bhut Baras tap Kiya Kasi/ Maran Bhya Maghar Ki Basi.

Kasi Maghar Sam Bichari/ Ochhi Bhagti Kaise Utras Pari.)

Kabir ridiculed the Hindu superstitious fear of Maghar while proclaiming his staunch faith in Rama, who was the same everywhere and who alone could save. “This poem is not a statement of fact about Kabir’s actual moving to *Maghar* at the time of his imminent death, but a proud challenge especially directed at the bigoted Brahmins of ‘Holy Kashi’. (63) People urged Kabir not to go *Maghar*, and they were full of grief at the thought of his departure. Kabir addressed them as follows:

Dying in Maghar, one becomes an ass, they say:

So, have you lost faith in Ram?

Dying in Maghar, you won’t know death,

Dying elsewhere, you will put Rama to shame.

What is Kashi? What is waste land of Maghar

If Rama dwells in my heart?

If Kabir dies in Kashi,

What honour will he bring Ram?

(Sabda 8, Vaudeville 160)

(Maghar Mare So Gadha Hoye/ Bhal Partit Rama So Khoyi.

Maghar Marae Maran Nahi Pave/ Ante Mare To Rama Lazave.

Kya Kashi Kya Ussar Maghar/ Rama Hirday Bas Mora.

Jo Kasi Tan Tjhae Kabira/ Ramai Kon Nihora.)

The mixed upbringing of Hindu and Muslim religion had contributed equally to mould the character and manner of Kabir's exemplary life. Hinduism and Islam were two different currents which structured and modified Kabir's religious ideology but rather than being tumbled in the confluence of these two currents, he emerged out of these troubled waters with a modified religious thought of his own. He did not follow the practices of the Hindu or Muslim saints living a life of renunciation and abdication but chose to live a saintly life while living with his family and earning livelihood as a common weaver.

The background of manual labour had a strong impression on the poetry of Kabir. He used the ordinary images of nature and family to interface the minute complexities to point the way to the divine nature. In other words, although Kabir was a householder, yet he found opportunities for meditation. Sometimes his avid interest in religion and religious men led him to neglect his business, for which his mother seemed to have reproached him for his neglect of his trade. She is said to have complained to other relatives:

This weaver is forever

Fetching his clay-pot

Forever plastering his kitchen.

He cares not for his loom or shuttle;

He is raptured by the bliss

of saying "Hari, Hari."

In our family, whoever said "Ram?"

Ever this son of mine

Has gotten hold of a rosary,

We've had no peace.

(Raga Bilawal 4, Dass 177-78)

(Nit Uth Kori Gagriya/ Le Lipat Janam Gye.

Tanna Bana Kachhu Na Sujhe/ Har Har Ras Laptaye.

Hamare Kul Kon Rama Kahio.

Jab Ki Mala Layi Nipoote/ Tab Te Sukh Na Bhayo.)

Kabir replied to his mother:

As long as I went on

Threading my shuttle

So long the thread of Ram's love

Kept snapping

Says Kabir.

O mother, listen

He who provides

is the lord of three worlds. (Pads of Kabir, Vaudeville 209)

(Jab Lag Taga Bahu Behi/ Tab Lag Bisre Rama Snehi.

Achho Mati Meri Jaat Julaha/ Har Ka Naam Lahiyo Mai Laha.

Kehat Kabir Suno Meri Mayi/ Hamara Inka Data Ek Raghurai.)

Kabir believed that he was acting in accordance with wish of God. He affirmed his dependence on God and hoped to get his needs fulfilled. Hence he says:

O Dindyal, my hope is in you:

My entire family has boarded the raft.

(Raga Gauri 61, Dass 90)

(Dindyal Bharose Tere.

Sab Parivaar Chadaya Bere.)

Thus, Kabir demonstrated that living a family life was not a barrier to spiritual progress. It was the purity of heart that guided and decided a true *bhakta*. It was not that when Kabir repeated the name of God, he renounced his ancestral trade and became some kind of a wandering ascetic. He realized the necessity of earning money for food and cloth and he earned the livelihood of his family by taking up his family profession of weaving. Kabir composed his hymn as if laying down conditions for his bhakti. He went a step further than other bhaktas in explaining that in asking for the bread and butter, he had not been greedy. He assured God that in fulfilment he would absolutely devote himself to His bhakti.

The sense of protest in Kabir takes on a delightful form. In one instance, when soliciting attention to the privations suffered by him as a devotee, he confronts the Divine with the ultimatum. He says:

It is hard to be a devotee

when you are hungry.

Here, take back your rosary.

.....

O Madho, how can I live

If I am ashamed of you.

(Raga Sorath 11, Dass, 162)

(Bhukhe Bhagati Na Kije/ Yeh Mala Apni Lize.

Madhav Kaisi Bane Tum Sange/ Aap Na Deu Tale Bahu Mange.)

Kabir was a practical occupant who always anticipated His God to afford him adequate assets to cater to the needs of his family and the sporadic guests. He emphasized the value of satisfaction and contentment in life. He did not want to accumulate wealth but only demanded just as much as was needed to fulfill the

demands of his family and his visiting guests. He was not in favour of begging from door to door for his basic necessities like rice, flour, lentils and salt etc. So, Kabir never took ascetic vows, nor did he become a *bairagi* or a denouncer. As Vaudeville observes:

Kabir's often expressed contempt for family ties and family honour is only equated by his disdain and aversion for professional ascetics: Yogis, *sadhus*, *sannyasis* and the like, whom he constantly ridicules. The general tenor of his verses makes it certain that he himself never donned ascetic garb, nor did he put on *tilak* and *mala*, or any of the various paraphernalia used by any particular sect, as he held all such disguises in utter contempt. (58)

Kabir offered a critique of the ideology and practice of the *yogi* and *siddha* sects. He did not commend the matted locks of the yogis and the dust and the ash they smeared their bodies with. Instead of the physical feats and the paraphernalia of the recluses, Kabir prescribed a mental and moral discipline to be adopted by the householder. He says:

A staff, earrings, patched cloak,
And a begging pouch-
You are wandering in superstition,
Dressed up as a yogi.
Forget your yogic posture, fool,
And breath- suspensions.
Leave this chicanery, fool,
And worship Hari.

(Raga Bilawal 8, Dass 180)

(*Ddandda Mundhra Khinthha Aadhaare,*

BhRama Kai Bhaal Bhavai Bhalkh Adhaare.

Aasan Pavan Dhoor Kar Bavarae,

Shhodd Kapatt Nith Har Bhaj Bavarae.

Jin Thoo Jaachehi So Thribhavan Bhogee,

Kahe Kabir Kaisa Jag Jogi.)

Kabir emphatically rejected the idea of a *yogi* who said that in order to attain salvation one must purify the heart and this could not be achieved without *yoga*. Kabir opines:

Yogis say only yoga is good and sweet

And nothing else, O my brothers.

Bald-pated ascetics and Gosain hermits

Say that only they have achieved illumination.

(Raga Gauri 51, Dass 79)

(Yogi Khe Yog Ha Niko/ Dvitiya Aur Na Bhai.

Chundit Mundit Maun Jatadhar/ Tinhu Kha Sidhi Payi.)

Kabir did not approve of ascetic life. He regarded all yogic exercises to be farcical and ludicrous and yogic pretensions to perpetuity merely gibberish. During his times there were many Hindu yogi-ascetics and Muslim *faqirs* to whom Kabir directed the following condemnation:

Many wear flowing robes-

What good is living in forests?

What good is incense to gods,

O my brother?

Why dip in holy pools?

O my soul, I know you must go-

O child understand the invisible.

What I see will never be the same again:

All are in Maya's embrace.

(Raga Gauri- Purabi 67, Dass 97)

(Bipal Bastar Kete Hai Pehre Kya Ban Madhe Basa

Kha Bhya Nar Deva Dhokhe Kya Jal Boryo Gyata

Jiyare Jahega Mai Jaana Abhigat Samaj Eiana

Jat Jat Dekhyo Bahor Na Pakhyo Sang Maya Laptana)

Kabir was influenced by the *Natha-Pantha* and he used the terminology of *Hatha-yoga* in his poetry.

In adopting the coded style of the *Siddhs* and the Nath-panth to describe the yogi, who might become his teacher, Kabir slips to some extent into their tradition, revealing that he is not totally against their beliefs; unquestionably, he is hostile to yogis who daub themselves with ashes or perform severe or whimsical ascetic practices. (Offredi 143)

Scholars like Vaudeville also seem to agree that, “the Kabirian corpus shares an esoteric vocabulary with Nath texts, but gives the Jargon a different turn and sometimes mocks the external pretensions of Nath Yogis.” (Gold 143) Kabir gave the same importance to the emotive element of Bhakti that the Nath Yogis gave to Hatha Yoga. He believed that disciplining the mind was more important than disciplining of the body. Therefore, he attached a lot of importance to dhyana, i.e. constantly remembering the Almighty. Kabir rejected the efficacy of Yoga and openly denounced the yogis and the Yoga system. He affirmed that it was the truly pious and devoted persons and not the yogis or ascetics who would be saved as all ascetics and hermits despite all their roaming in the forests were unable to achieve God. He asserted that it was only after repeating the ‘nama’, which alone was ‘a tree that would become the raft and would carry us to the other side’; it was only after meeting the ‘True Guru’ that all darkness would be cast away. Kabir, instead, suggested the

yogis and ascetics to meditate and make 'righteousness and mercy' their gardens.
Kabir says:

Make peace your earrings,

Mercy your begging bag,

Meditation your begging bowls.

I have sewn my beggar's blanket

For my body;

My staff is His name, O yogi.

(Raga Ramkali 7, Dass 202)

(Mundra Maun Dya Kar Jholi/ Patr Ka Karau Bichhar Re.

Khintha Eh Tan Siau/ Apna Naam Karau Adhaar Re.)

Tantricism was another cult popular in those times which was believed to be linked with cult of *Shakti*, the female energy of the Supreme Divinity, Shiva, and a legion of goddesses. These goddesses had to be pleased with blood offerings and human sacrifices (*bali*). These cults were deemed impure and had been vehemently opposed by practitioners of bhakti. The worshippers of *Shakti* were known as *Saktas*. The *Saktas* were also characterized for their dietary distinctions which involved consumption of meat etc. The *Saktas* were men addicted to drink and women and suspected of abominable Tantric practices. The practitioners of bhakti considered *Saktas* inimical to their own beliefs. Kabir's radical condemnation of blood rites and animal killing, even for the purpose of food, stands on the same *ahimsa* (non-violence) principle. Many verses attributed to Kabir contain bitter scathing denunciation against *Saktas*. Kabir says:

Better the bitch of a Vaishnav

Than the mother of a Shakta:

The one keeps listening to Hari's praise,

While the other runs to buy sin!

(Shloka 52, Vaudeville 303)

(Kabira, Baishno Ki Kookar Bhali/ Shakat Ki Buri Mayi.

Oh Nit Suneh Harnaam Jas/ Oh Paap Bisahan Jayi.)

Kabir was highly sarcastic about the *Sakta's* loose dietary habits with sexual morals. He implicitly compared Sakta with a pig that indiscriminately ate everything and the mother was compared to a bitch that slept around with everyone. He says:

A pig is better than Shakta,

For he keeps the village clean.

Once the wretched Shakta is dead,

No one will remember him.

(Shalok 143, Vaudeville 309)

(Kabira, Shakat Se Shukar Bhala/ Rakhe Achha Gao.

Oh Shakat Bapura Mar Gya/ Khe Na Leho Nao.)

Kabir compared the truly liberated Sant with the *Sakta* who would take birth in this world repeatedly and no one would remember him once he died, whereas the *Sant* would get liberated and meet God forever. Here, Kabir claims immortality for the devotee of God. He contrasts this certainty with the fate of *Saktas*. Kabir may be obliquely referring to the claim of some Tantric sects that they can guide their adepts to immortality by way of Hath Yoga, producing the nectar of immortality.

Sant Kabir fiercely attacked the recognised and authoritative practices of the Hindu religion. He derided and wrote with sheer contempt against the supremacy of the conservative Brahmins. He unequivocally condemned the various practices which the religious people had been practicing for centuries, such as ceremonies, sacrifices, lust for magical power, image and temple worship, chanting of mantras, penances, asceticism and yoga, etc. The ascetics only dressed their bodies and neglected training their minds. If they trained and trimmed their minds, only then they would attain success in their efforts to attain salvation. Kabir condemned smearing *vibhuti* or ash on the forehead without bothering to understand the importance of real knowledge. It

was only the internal realization and not the outward appearance which mattered. Kabir had no respect for mechanical ceremonial rituals and piety. He opined that it was only by single minded devotion and meditation of the Lord that man might realize Him and not by observing formalities.

Kabir called the religious aspirant maintaining celibacy a *hijara* (eunuch) and poked fun at the yogi who in his quest for heaven tonsured his head, took a vow of celibacy, and shunned worldly life. Kabir satirized the asceticism and other Hindu rituals in the following way:

If by roaming around naked, you can find God,

Then all the forest animals should have been saved.

Why go naked and wear skins, when you can't see Rama in your heart.

If by shaving your head, you gain spiritual fulfillment,

Why aren't all the sheep, Saved?

If by holding back sperm, you acquire salvation, my friend,

Why haven't eunuchs achieved, that highest condition of the soul?

Kabir says.

(Raga Gauri 4, Dass 43)

(Nagan Firat Jo Payiye Jog/ Ban Ka Mirg Mukat Sab Hog.

Kya Nange Kya Bhandhe Chaam/ Jab Nahi Chinhas AtamRam.

Mund Mundaye Jo Sidhi Paye/ Mukat Bhed Na Gaya Kaye.

Bindu Rakh Jo Taraya Bhai/ Khusrau Kyo Na PaRama Gat Payi.)

Kabir not only satirized the Hindu and Muslim religious practices but also used unique logic and sharp wit to expose the hypocrisy that had penetrated both the

religions. In a very famous and interesting anecdote, Ramananda demanded cow's milk to perform some *puja* and asked his disciple to bring the milk. Kabir placed the vessel near the cow which had recently died and piled grass for her to eat. He waited for hours but nothing happened. On his return, he explained that he thought perhaps the milk of a dead cow would be more fitting for the deceased ancestors. To his astonishment, the dead cow didn't eat anything and then he argued how the ancestors, so long dead, could drink the milk? Kabir severely denounced the rituals of *shradh* and animal sacrifices to please the dead ones and the idols of clay that were lifeless. He castigated the professional Brahmin class that perpetuated senseless rituals among the public. His sarcasm is sharp and blunt, as for instance, in regard to the custom of *shradh*. Kabir says:

No one cares for their parents
When they are alive-
But when they die, people offer sradha.
Tell me, how will the poor parents get
What is being eaten by ravens and dogs.
.....
You make goddesses and gods of clay
And then you offer them living sacrifices-
You call these your ancestors
Who can't even ask
For what they want?
You cut down living creatures;
You worship lifeless objects:
It will be hard for you in the end.

(Raga Gauri- Bairagan 45, Dass 71)

*(Jeevat Pitar Na Mane Kou/ Muen Shraad Krahi,
Pitar Bhi Bapure Kho Kyu/ Pave Kaua Kookar Khayi.
Mati Ke Kar Devi Deva/ Tis Age Jio Dehi,
Aise Pitar Tumahre Kahiye/ Aapan Khan Na Lehi.
Sarjio Kate Nirjio Pooje/ Ant Kaal Ko Bhari,
Rama Nam Ki Gat Nahi Jaani/ Bhai Doobe Sansari.)*

Kabir loathed the hypocritical and unscrupulous Brahmins and poured scorn over them. He made a mockery of their injunctions, admonitions and pious assurances to the people. All this he did to undermine the prestige and authority of the priestly class in the eyes of the common man. For him, this was the first step of liberating the people from the priestly-feudal thrall. Kabir gave an account of the religious degeneration of the Hindus and the Muslims of his times. He was very critical of *karmakanda*, the religious rituals and practices which were prevalent in the country. These rituals had been ordained by the scriptures. But the common people were exploited by these religious practices and quite often the religion itself had degenerated into mere forms and ceremonies. Pilgrimages had been popular since time immemorial and Brahmanism laid great stress on it. The bath at the sacred places of pilgrimages was considered a virtuous act in Hinduism. Kabir exposed the utter uselessness of pilgrimages. Kabir was totally against bathing in the sacred and holy rivers like Ganges to wash away the sins. He uttered strong words against such practices and paying visits to such pilgrimages. Kabir remarks:

There is nothing but water, at the holy bathing place
And I know they are useless, for I have bathed in them.

(Poem 52, Tagore 46)

*(Teerath Mein To Sab Pani Hai Hovat Kuchh Nhi Nhaye
Dekha.)*

In another verse, he says:

Those ritually bathing, day and night

Are like frogs, in water.

Without love for Ram's name in their hearts,

They are all in the power of Daharamraja.

(Raga Gauri 5, Dass 43)

(Sandhya Praat Isnaan Krahi/ Jio Paye Dadar Pani Mahi,

Jaupe Rama Rama Rati Nahi/ Te Sab Dharma rai Ke Jahi).

Kabir claimed that one could not have inner peace by bathing in the holy banks. Even at those holy places people were busy with their good and bad deeds. The inner filth and the dirt could not be cleaned by taking bath at the holy shrines and nobody would achieve salvation. He says:

If bathing in water

Brings salvation-

Then frogs are forever bathing.

And like these frogs

are such people:

Again and again they are reborn.

(Raga Asa 37, Dass 150)

(Jal Ke Majan Je Gat Hove/ Nit Nit Mendak Naave,

Jaise Mendak Taise Oye Nar/ Fir Fir Joni Aave.)

For Kabir, religion did not consist in symbols, rituals and pilgrimages. He turned away from the formal and external side of religion and emphasized the inner life wherein, through contemplation and ethical living, one discovered the spark of divinity within. It was the purity of the mind that Kabir always lived and yearned for. Only after cleansing and purifying the mind and the heart, one could achieve God and true salvation. If one's mind was pure, God would run after him to shower all His

blessings including salvation. Kabir held that purity of the mind was more rewarding than even devotion to the Lord. Kabir says:

I have cleansed my mind

Pure as Ganges water.

The lord now runs after me.--

Calling Kabir Kabir.

(Das, G. N 44)

(Kabir Man Nirmal Bhya/ Jaise Ganga Neer.

Pachhe Pachhe Har Fire/ Kahat Kabir Kabir)

Idol worship was believed to be a means for manipulation of the ordinary masses by the priestly castes to keep the power in their hands. Kabir denounced idol worship of all forms. Through his verses, Kabir rejected such practices, stating them to be fruitless and delusional and encouraged the people to rather focus their spiritual energies within the self. He stated that those stone idols did not speak and did not give anything to anyone.

The images are all lifeless, they cannot; speak, I know, for I
have cried aloud to them.

(Poem 52, Tagore 46)

(Pratima Sakal To Jarr Ha/ Kabhi Bolte Huye Nahi Dekha.

The purana and Koran are mere words: lifting up the
curtain, I have seen.

Kabir gives utterance to the words of experience; and he
knows very well that all other things are untrue.

(Tagore 46)

(Pratima Sakal To Jarr Ha/ Kabhi Bolte Huye Nahi Dekha.

Puran Koran Sab Baate Ha/ Yeh Ghat ka Parda Khol Dekha.

Anubhav Ki Baat Kare Kabira/ Yeh Sab Jhooth Ha Pol Dekha.)

Kabir highly criticised the customary celebrations as performed and stipulated by the high caste Brahmins. Such religious rituals and services were useless and fruitless. The people in this materialistic world were occupied in fallacious observances of religious rituals without realising the mysterious ways of God. “Kabir had no place for idolatry; for it seemed to him that, if God is one, the whole basis of idolatry perishes. He was, therefore, unsparing in his denunciation of the practice.” (Keay 73) Kabir asks:

O mind, you make your gods and goddesses, and kill living
creatures to amke offerings to them;

But if your gods are true, why do theynot take them when
grazing

in the fields?

(Bijak, Sabda 70, Shah 129)

(Mati Ke Kar Devi Deva/ Kaat Kaat Kar Jiva Deyia Ji,

Jo Tohri Ha Sancha Devi/ Khet Charat Kyu Nahi Leyia Ji.)

The Brahmin was always at the receiving end of Kabir’s comments. He regarded the Brahmin as a crafty, unkind, and status-conscious person. Kabir regarded his *bhakti* as mere pretence since that *bhakti* had no sympathy and warmth for the other creations of God. Kabir spoke of the futility of the offering of the live flowers to the lifeless idols. He made sarcastic remarks on the greedy *pujari*, in charge of the ritual awakening of the Deity, who cared little for the God he was supposed to feed with the oblations.

Gardener’s girl, Gathering petals,

Don’t you know, each petal has life.

The stone, for which you pluck these petals

Is lifeless.

The idol was made by chiseling stone;

Often the sculptor put his foot on the chest

If these idols were real, it would have devoured

The sculptor.

(Raga Asa 14, Dass 133)

(Pati Tore Malini Pati Pati Jio,

Jis Pahun Ko Pati Tore So Pahun Nirjio.

Pashan Gad Ke Murat Kini Teke Chhati Pau,

Jo Eh Murat Sachi Ha To Gadanhare Khaau.)

Kabir condemned both Hindus and Muslims who had spent all their lives worshipping lifeless idols in temples and bowing their heads in the mosques. Hindus burnt their dead and the Muslims buried them but neither of them had learned the reality of the Supreme God. Kabir says if God could be found by worshipping stones, then:

I shall worship a mountain:

Better than these stones are the

Stones of the flour mill with which men

Grind their corn.

(cited in Westcott 34)

(Pahan Pooje Har Mile/ To Mai Pooju Phaar,

Tate to Chakki Bhali/ Pisi Khaye Sansaar.)

Kabir did not condemn idol worship only but also discarded all rituals and ceremonies related with idols such as carrying rosary and putting *tilak* on the forehead. Thus he says:

A *tilak* on your forehead, a rosary in your hand,
Vestments on your body: people think Rama is a toy.
.....

I do not pluck petals, nor worship gods-
Without devotion to Ram, service is useless.

(Raga Bhairo 6, Dass 230)

(*Maathe Tilak Hath Mala Bana/ Logan Rama Khilona Jana.*

Toro Na Pati Poojo Na Deva/ Rama Bhagath Bin Nihfal Seva.)

Although Kabir accepted Ramananda as his guru but he did not join the community of his cult or any cult whatsoever. He was familiar with the basic concepts of both Vaishnavism and Sufism and was influenced by the beliefs of both the cults. In this way, Kabir has deviated from the pure Bhakti cult of his guru, Ramananda. Rather he focussed more attentively on basic rudimentary assumptions and postulations articulated by religion. He laid stress on the same fundamental principles of both the religions having true worship and devotion to the Lord, universal brotherhood and love for all human beings and leading a virtuous life.

Kabir was against creating any cult around him. He did not believe in any sectarianism. He had no orthodoxy and was willing to learn from a true saint of any religious sect or creed. His disapproval of both Hinduism and Islam did not mean that he wanted to establish a new faith. But what he disapproved was only the popular forms of both the religions which were full of superstitions and were burdened with the deadening weight of external rituals. He was opposed to the use of any sectarian marks such as putting *tilak* on the forehead or wearing *tulsi mala* around the neck. According to a tradition, When Kabir realized that his epigrams were attracting a following; he started loitering around the city in the company of a well known prostitute. He pretended to be drunk so that he could ward off the attention he was receiving. He did not want to start a cult.

Kabir was a non-conformist and trod an untrodden path singing *Apane raah tu chale Kabira* (go your own way, Kabir). As Braj Ranjan Mani observes:

His own way was not hamstrung by the rules of the establishment, its religion, custom, caste, or scripture. It was his own way that was made luminous by his worldly perception and inner experience. Despite persistent threats to his life, he never desisted from telling what he saw around him. The sectarian zealots killing each other in the name of their religions deeply troubled him; he could not reconcile himself to this mad world. (148)

Kabir says:

O Sants, behold, the world is mad

If I speak the truth, they rush to beat me: the world
believes in falsehood.

I have seen observers of all rights, performers of all duties:
at early dawn they bathe.

Then they slay souls and worship stones: knowledge
is then there is none.

I have seen many Pirs and Aulias: they read the Book the
Quran

They initiate disciples and give instruction in such
knowledge as they have.

The Hindu says "Rama is my beloved": the Turk
"Rehman is mine."

They have lost their lives ever quarrelling one with
another: none understand the secret.

(Bijak, Sabda 4, Shah 95)

(Santo Dekhat Jag Baurana/ Sanch Kho to Maaran Dhave

Jhootha Jag Patiyana.

Pitar Pathar Poojan Lage/ Teerath Garav Bhulana,

Mala Pehne topi Dineh/ Chhap Tilak Anumana.

Hindu Khe Mohi Rama Pyara/ Turuk Khe Rehmana,

Apas Me Dou Lar Lar Mue/ Ma Rama Na Kahu Jana.)

Kabir's thorough-going radicalism and his impatience with restrictive values and norms are quite evident in his verses. He tried to ignite an autonomy and fearlessness in those who aspired to be his followers. He says:

I have burnt my own house,

torch in hand.

Now I'll burn the house

of him who follows my path.

(Sakhi 5, Vaudeville 176))

(Kabira Khara Bazaar Me, Liye Lukathi Haath,

Jo Ghar Phoonke Apna, Chle Hamare Saath.)

Kabir was deeply concerned with the socio-religious issues of his time. "The period in which Kabir emerged is noted for what is known as the schism of the soul and the schism of the body politic, and the response of the reformers was positive. So, Kabir was the product of both the destructive and constructive elements of his age." (Iraqi 147) He was a great revolutionary and uncompromising saint. In his verses, he addressed the people of all castes and communities and tried to establish a strict monotheism and monism. He preached that God was one, without attributes, found everywhere. He says:

If God lives in the mosque, to whom belongs the

remaining country side?

Rama resides in the pilgrim- places and the images:

in neither they have found Him out.

Who said that Vedas and Books are false? They
are false who do not ponder.

With in all bodies One is seen: 'tis fear of a second
that destroys.

Whatever, male or female, is created, they are all
Thy form.

O Kabir, the son of Allah and Rama, he is my Guru
and my Pir.

(Bijak, Sabda 97, Shah 142)

(Allah Ek Masit Basat Ha/ Aur Mulak Kis Kera,

Hindu Murat Naam Nivasi/ Doh Mahe Tat Na Hera.

Dakhan Des Hari Ka Basa/ Pachham Allah Mukama,

Dil Me Khoj, Dile Dil Khoju/ Ehi Thour Mukama.)

Kabir loudly proclaimed that there was the same God for the Hindus as for the Muslims. He was ready to pay homage to both Allah and Rama. As Dvivedi points out, "... but if Arabic and Persian words remind one of Muslim culture and Sanskrit and Hindi words remind one of Hindu culture, then Kabir does not allow this division of intellect to flourish." (284) Kabir pronounced:

The Master of Hindus and Turks

Is one and the same

What use is being

A Mullah and a Sheikh?

(Raga Bahiro 4, Dass 229)

(Hindu Turuk Ka Saheb Ek

Keh Kar Mullah Khe Kare Sheikh.)

Kabir has been presented as an apostle of the unity and harmony of Hinduism and Islam but the Western scholar Linda Hess does not agree with this view. Hess is of the opinion,

Some modern commentators have tried to present Kabir as a synthesizer of Hinduism and Islam; the picture is a false one. While drawing on various traditions as he saw fit, Kabir emphatically declared his independence from both the major religions of his countrymen, vigorously attacked the follies of both, and tried to kindle the fire of a similar autonomy and courage in those who claimed to be his disciples. (5)

Purshotam Aggarwal along with Linda Hess is also of the view that Kabir never advocated the unity of Hindus and Muslims. He literally and purposely questioned each and every kind of customary observances, the practice of scrupulous adherence to prescribed and external forms. Kabir's denunciation of any religion actually explored a basic interrelation with the Cosmos without the intercession of any established religion.

Kabir's advocacy of the unity and equality of all was nothing less than revolutionary in the society which was dominated by the caste, ethnicity and religious ethnicity. He tried his best to demolish the barriers that separated man from man. He either dismissed the Hindu and Muslim ideas of God and religion or else equated them by saying that Rama and Allah were identical. The God of Kabir was '*ghat ghat mein*' (Kabir's God is neither in the temple nor in the mosque, but everywhere). This concept of God led Kabir to believe in God as transcendent and beyond approach. But he also presented Him as one with whom personal interaction could be developed. Kabir having searched inside him had found God within him.

Kabir always repudiated to acknowledge the supremacy of the Brahmins and rejected the conviction that some good actions performed in the previous life helped in taking birth in the superior caste. He recommended impartiality between Brahmins and *Shudras* and became a champion of the downtrodden. He tried to awaken the

people about the duplicity and the hypocrisy of the priests exploiting people's religious sentiments to serve their own ends. Kabir's attitude to caste discrimination may be judged as vehement denunciation of the system. The mediators of God whom Kabir called deceptors had devised low and high castes and divided men into high caste Brahmins and low caste *Shudras*. Kabir was of the opinion that all human beings hailed from the same earth and went back to the same land. It was only when they got influenced by the ways of the world that all these divisions and distinctions took place.

Kabir through his poetic protest provided *Shudras* and other low caste people an innovative inner method to achieve liberation of the soul. He questioned the conservative and despotic Brahmanical apprehensions of Hindu religion and paved the way for the deprived, downtrodden and marginalized to proceed on the path of spiritual progress emphasising love and dedication – non-canonical methods to achieve deliverance. His poetry regulated an undeviated trend of social dissent and resistance amid the low caste people. It warranted them with great inmost firmness to stand up against social inequities and infringements they had been undertaking from generation to generation. Tearing into the claims of birth-based elite; he challenged the Brahmin who had lost his sanctity and integrity by his actions. The Brahmin felt very proud of his high caste and his pride led him to acts of cruelty towards *Shudras* and low caste people. Kabir questioned the authority of the Brahmins over the *Shudras* and challenged them:

You don't know your caste, when you're in the womb.

All are born, from Brahma's seed.

Say, pundit, when did you become a Brahmin?

Don't waste your life saying, "I'm a Brahmin."

If you are a Brahmin, born of a Brahmin mother,

Then why weren't you born, by some other method?

How are you a Brahmin? How are we Sudras?

How are we of blood? /How are you of milk?

(Raga Gauri 7, Dass 45)

(Garabh Vaas Meh Kul Nahi Jati/ Brahm Bind Te Sab Utpati.

Kho Re Pandit Bahman Kab Ke Hoye

Bahman Keh Keh Janam Mat Khoye.

Jo Tu Bahman Bahmni Jaya/ Aan Baat kahe Nahi Aaya.

Jo Pe Karta Varan Vichare/ To Janpat Hi Dand Kin Sare.

Tum Kat Brahman Hum Kat Sood

Hum Kat Lahoo Tum Kat Dhoodh.)

Kabir was a full- blooded critic of the status quo. He had an enduring appeal for the subordinated people as a living symbol of anti-establishment.

He wanted a complete overhaul of the diseased system. He waged a relentless struggle for the liberation of society from dogmatic fetters of every kind in favour of an alternative culture which accords dignity to everyone, including the last man in the street. Compromise and half way solutions were not his way. His fight against the forces of retrogression and oppression was total and relentless. (Mani 149)

Kabir says:

Where have Hindus and Turks come from?

Who started, / these fine distinctions?

Think; ponder in your heart, fool:

Who will go to heaven or hell?

(Raga Asa 8, Dass 130-31)

(Hindu Turuk Kha Te Aaya/ Kin Yeh Raah Chlaya.

Dil Me Khoje Dil Hi Me Dekho/ Bhist Kha Kin Paya.)

Kabir condemned the Brahmins and Mullahs as professional mediators between God and Man, who considered themselves of a superior caste but filled their bellies at the cost of others. Kabir stigmatized ordinary Brahmins who performed rituals in the home of 'vile' *Shudras*, for the sake of food and money.

Kabir vehemently criticized various Brahmanical notions e.g. moon eclipses and moonless days of each month (*amavasya*) were inauspicious and dangerous; to counter evil influences some auspicious acts such as giving alms to Brahmins were necessary and so on. The greedy Brahmins didn't miss the opportunity to befool innocent people. As the night fell, they would take lamp in their hands and start their rounds. Kabir makes sarcastic remarks regarding these Brahmins in the following verse:

You call yourself high-caste, / but you eat at the expense
of the low- caste: / you fill your belly
by doing wayward deeds.

On the fourteenth and fifteenth /of each month,

You make up stories in order to beg-

Although you carry a lamp, / you still fall into the well.

You are a Brahmin, / I, a weaver from Benaras.

How can we be equal, / I rose by saying Ram's name;

You sank, O pundit, clutching the Vedas.

(Raga Ramkali 5, Dass 201)

*(Apna Oonch Neech Ghar Bhojan/ Ghrin KaRama Kar Udar
Bhrae.*

*Chaudas Amavas Duk Duk Mange/ Kar Deepak Liye Koop
Pare.*

*Tu Brahman Mai Kaseek Julaha/ Mohi Tohi Brabaree Kaise
Ke Baneh,*

*Hamre Rama Nam Keh Ubare/ Ved Bharose Pane Doobe
Mareh.)*

Kabir was an uncompromising opponent of the caste system. His critique comprised the social order that assisted the conventional and age old, orthodox pecking order with high caste Pundits as the leaders of the hierarchy who propounded various principles and wove a web of rituals to retain its caste-based domination. He was not even ashamed of his low caste because he felt himself to be near to God.

Kabir, that caste of mine
is a joke to every one:
Blessed indeed be such a birth
That let me invoke the Creator!

(Shalok 2, Vaudeville 297)

(Kabira Meri Jaat Ko/ Sab Ko Hasanehaar.

Balihari Is Jaat Ko/ Jeh Japio Sirjanhaar.)

He rather mocked the fallacious customs, great ostentatious display and plethoric melodramatic point of view of Brahminism and rebutted the idea. He declares:

The donkey is far better than Brahmin
Dog is better than other castes
The cock is better than Mullah
They wake the people by their blasts.

(Doha 180, Das 74)

(Brahman Se Gadha Bhla/ Aan Jaan Se Kuta,

Mullah Se Murga Bhla/ Raat Jagave Suta.)

Kabir attempted to obliterate the difference between the people of both the religions which was nothing but an accident of faith. He saw refractions of the divine in all human beings who were quintessentially no different from one another. He had nothing but contempt for all those who did not see this essential unity of mankind. He preached that all men were children of one God. They came from the same place and were constructed from the same elements. He asserts:

It's all one blood, one shit,

One skin, one flesh-

From a single drop the whole creation emerged:

Who is Brahmin? Who is Shudra?

(Pads 1, Vaudeville 216)

(Ek Boond, Eke Mal Muttar,

Ek Chham Ek Gooda.

Ek Jyoti Se Sab Utpanno,

Kon Brahman Kon Sooda.)

According to the Hindu tradition, rituals like *Havana* were performed for the purification of the atmosphere. The Brahmins were feasted on certain occasions and the food stuff was prepared in a purified place. Cow dung was used for the purification of the place. According to Hindu practices if the kitchen was not purified, evil spirits would enter it and make the eatables impure and unfit for eating. The woman was considered impure on certain occasions e.g. after giving birth to a child, and this impurity was removed on the thirteenth day after performing certain rites and rituals. The impurity also lasted for a certain period after the death of a member of the family. The following verse presents the thorough-going subtlety of Kabir where he interrogates the dissension of the social set-up constructed on the basis of purity and pollution.

Tell me, O pandit, what place is pure-

Where I can sit and eat my meal?

Mother was impure, Father was impure-

The fruit they bore were also impure.

They arrived impure, they left impure-

Unlucky folks, they died impure.

.....

Cowdung's impure, /the bathing-square's impure-

Its very curbs, /are nothing but impure.

Kabir says, /only they are pure

Who have completely cleansed

Their thinking.

(Dharwadker 124)

(Kho Pandit, Sucha Kaun Thau/ Jha Bais Ho Bhojan Khau,

Mata Joothi Pita Bhi Jootha/ Joothe Hi Fal Lage,

Aveh Joothe Jahe Bhi Joothe/ Joothe Mare Abhage.

Gobar Jootha Chaunka Jootha/ Joothi Dini Kara,

Keh Kabir Teyi Nar Sooche/ Sachi Pari Bichara.)

As Dharwadkar comments, "The poem rejects all conventional Hindu arguments about physical, material, or ritual purity and impurity; in opposition it proposes the mind of 'thought' as the only true locus of purity, so that all exterior sites are necessarily impure and the true purity is only interior." (218) Kabir did not have any faith in purity or pollution nor in rituals in which the presence or the guidance of a Brahmin priest was deemed necessary. He emphasized the fact that a man must be clean not only in his thoughts and words but also in his deeds. In another verse he says:

O pandit! Be careful about your water!

In this mud-house where you're sitting,

Are the remains of all living beings.

(Sabda 47, Vaudeville 157)

(Pandit Boojh Piyo Tum Pani

Ja Mati Ke Ghar Me Baithe

Tame Srisht Smani.)

Kabir emphatically argued that superiority of a man was determined not by taking birth in the high caste but by his actions. Man should not feel proud of his high place because ultimately he had to lie down on the earth and grass would grow on their dust-covered bodies. Kabir also insinuated that changing religion did not make any difference and was meaningless as every faith led to the Almighty. He posed a number of questions to God. Kabir asks:

Settle this one quarrel, O Ram,

you want service from your slave:

Is the soul; greater,

Or that in to which it is absorbed?

Is Brahma greater? or He who created him?

Are the Vedas greater, or the source from which they emerged?

Kabir, say, I can't make up my mind

Whether pilgrimage is greater, or Hari's slave?

(Raga Gauri 42, Dass 67)

(Jhagra Ek Bado Jiyajaan/ Jo Nirvare So Nirvaan.

Brahm Bada Ki Jhan Te Aya/ Ved Bda Ki Jin Upjaya.

*Brahm Brahm Kabira Fire Udass/ Teerath Bda Ki Teerath Ka
Dass.)*

These questions reflected a conflict between the concepts of spiritual experience and spiritual knowledge. “Kabir’s attempt is to provoke his audience and leave them in a state of heightened consciousness when the answer will suggest itself from within. The dialogism of dissent in his poems is located in the process of questioning and the emphatic rejection of jargons of theology.” (Ramakrishan, Springer 113)

Kabir rejected the caste system as a ridiculous thing which was meaningless for a true devotee of God. Kabir also criticized those who were proud of their wealth, power and family status. In his opinion, men who dressed in bright and showy clothes with betel leaves in their mouths without reciting the name of God would certainly go to hell. He says:

Kabir, don’t be so proud,

You are bones in a bag of skin:

Those with fine horses and umbrellas

At last are buried in the ditch.

(Shalok 37, Vaudeville 301)

(Kabira Garab Na Kijiye/ Chaam Lapete Haad.

Haver Uppar Chhattar Tar/ Te Fun Dharni Gaad.)

Kabir was very critical of the power and privileges enjoyed by the rich and the wealthy people. He says that ‘the rich use costly clothes, wear gold and diamond ornaments and sleep in soft beds, while the poor people wear rags and sleep on the ground’. Hence, Kabir questioned the feudal structure of his times which gave rich and the powerful many facilities and right to rule and exercise authority. There was a spirit of anxiety and hostility in Kabir’s words against the political authorities who were exploiting the common people and the peasants. He not only attacked the priestly class but also targeted the rich merchants and feudal lords. “He named the *Bohias* and *Baniyas* as exploiting money lenders, and among the Muslims he included both the Turkish immigrants who looked down on Indians, and converted upper-class Muslims.” (Shobha 24) Kabir rejected the notion that only elite had the right to rule.

He marked the disparity between the rich and the poor. He says:

No one respects a poor man; he may do a thousand things,

But no one pays attention.

If a poor man goes to a rich man,

The rich man does not even look at him.

If a rich man goes to a poor man, he is respected-

And called "sir"

Kabir, say, "poor is he

Who does not have

His name in his heart"

(Raga Bhairo 8, Dass 231)

(Nirdhan Adar Koi Na Deyi/ Laakh Jatan Kar Ohu Chit Na Dhareyi.

Jo Nirdhan sardhan Ke Jaye Age Baitha Peeth Firaye.

Jo Sardhan Nirdhan Ke Jaye Diya afar Liya Bulaye.

Nirdhan Sardhan Donu Bhai Prabh ki Kala Na Meti jayi.

Keh Kabir Nirdhan Hai Soyi Jaake Hirday Naam Na Hoyi.)

Kabir asserted that the poor man was humble, good and respected one and all. In the same way, he deserved to be treated well and respectfully because real greatness of man lay in the goodness of his heart and conduct, and not his wealth. All big or small people were creation of one God and there should be equal feeling of love and compassion without any discrimination. Kabir implied that the humble and the small man should not be disparaged because of his humble and low position; he should be given due respect and honour as any other man.

Kabir was also against the accumulation of wealth. He emphasized the value

of satisfaction and contentment with what one had got. But Kabir wanted to have adequate funds so that he could feed his family and occasional guest. Kabir was of the view that satisfaction did not come with the material wealth. That is why he asked only for enough to maintain himself and his family and to help some needy and hungry. He criticized those who were proud of their wealth, power and family status because even they had to depart from this world leaving everything behind. He warns:

Kabir, cowrie by cowrie

People have amassed lakhs and crores

Yet, when departing, they keep nothing;

Stripped of all, up to their loincloth.

(Shalok 144, Vaudeville 309)

(Kabir Cowdi Cowdi Jorr Ke Jore Lakh Crore.

Chalat Baar Na Kacchu Miliyo Layi Langoti Tore.)

As part of his resistance to the Brahminical religious authority, Kabir democratized spirituality by preaching that everyone should have free and direct access to God and that iconic representation of the divine, ritualistic religious practices and caste distinctions were irrelevant to the attainment of a heightened state of spiritual consciousness. The common man was denied the key to the wealth of spiritual knowledge with the scriptures and such other holy books written in Sanskrit. It was in such a setting Kabir pledged to use the vernacular language, being bold enough to resist the established practices. Kabir was not satisfied with the traditional system of religious knowledge which led to controversies. He demolished the idea of acquisition of knowledge through traditional education. He based his religion not on any particular scripture or doctrine, but on mysticism itself. “As a true mystic, he regarded the personal spiritual experience alone as the final truth. The formal philosophical controversies over the question of the *Dvaita* (dualistic) and *Advaita* (non-dualistic) explanation of the ultimate Reality, and the *Nirguna* and *Saguna* nature of the Brahmin were thus totally irrelevant for him.” (Sharma, Krishna 22)

Reading and pondering on the Veda, the pundits went astray:

The mystery of their own self, they never pierced!

(Ramaini 3, Vaudeville 149)

(Pandit Bhule Pad Gun Veda

Apu Apnapau Jaan Na Bheda.)

Kabir revelled in puncturing the Brahmin's pretension to enlightenment. He presented the *Pundit* who projected himself as the repository of all knowledge as a pompous fool who lacked insight into reality. He expressed deep contempt for the babble of the Pundits and compared his holy books to 'a cell made of paper' to imprison innocent fools. He scoffed at their claim to intellectual superiority. He called such Pundits as buffoons who searched the sky but couldn't find out how to quell their pride. Kabir remarks:

They built a cell made of paper

With gates made out of ink

In the ground, they have sown stones

And the pundits loot them all.

(Sakhi 26, Vaudeville 205)

(Kabir Kagad Ki Oubree/ Mas Ke KaRama Kapaat,

Pahan Borree Pirthame/ Pundit Parree Baat.)

Kabir rejected the spiritual authorities of both the communities. He took the scriptures to be biased and leading to conflict among different religions. "The dichotomy between the mind dependent on conventional knowledge and heart free from all worldly compulsions is a common theme of his verses." (Kidwai 172) Kabir says:

The daughter of the Vedas

Is Smriti, O my brothers;

She has brought with her

A chain and a rope.

She has leashed her own city

With love's snare, and drawn death's sorrow.

(Raga Gauri 31, Dass 58)

(Ved Ki Putri Smriti Bhai/ So Jewar Kar Lete Bhai.

Aphun Vari Aphu Garbanda, Jhoothi Moh Kal Ko Dhanda.)

He also said:

Only those are good horse –riders

Who keep far away

From holy books.

(58-59)

(Kehat Kabir Bhale Aswara

Ved Kiteb Te Rehat Nirara.)

The rejection of the divine sanctity of the *Vedas* and thus, the very basis of Brahmanic hegemony revealed a deep resentment in Kabir. Kabir declared that the mantra-chanting priests were rogues out to cheat and fleece the people whose productive occupations were dignified, whereas those who smeared their bodies with ashes and lost themselves in Vedic humbug were good for nothing but parasitic idiots. The *Pundits* and the *purohits*, according to Kabir, did not know anything about the mystery of Rama. They were befooling people by telling false tales in the morning and evening. He says:

Vedas and Puranas are the Mirror of the blind

Could the spoon taste the savour of food?

Like an ass loaded with sandal-wood,

The poor beast, could he enjoy the sweet perfume?

(Ramaini 11, Vaudeville 154)

(Andh So Darpan Ved Purana/ Darbi Kha Maha Ras Jana.

*Jas Khar Chandan Lade Bhara/ Parimal Baans Na Jane
Ganwara).*

In another verse he says;

Why read?

Why meditate?

Why listen to the Vedas and puranas?

What use is reading and listening.

If you don't naturally yearn for Him?

(Raga Sorath 7, Dass 159-60)

(Ka Padiye Kya Guniye/ Kya Ved Puran Suniye.

Pade Gune Mat Hoyi/ Ma Sahaje Paya Soyi.)

Kabir pointed out that God dwelled in the heart of man like fragrance in the flower but due to ignorance, man did not realize this and tried to find Him everywhere else. It was not by reading the scriptures and Vedas again and again that one could become learned and wise. It was only by having the knowledge of the essence of the love of the Supreme Lord that one could become wise. The knowledge after reading all the scriptures did not dispel the doubts of the mind. It made man stupid and deprived him of God's love. True knowledge was possible only by deep love devotion to the Lord and by chanting His name. Dvivedi writes about Kabir:

This love is everything, not the Vedas, not the scriptures, not the Koran, not prayer, not garlands, not painted images, not temples, not mosques, not messengers. This love is way beyond the reach of all external *acara*. It is much better than the performance of all life cycle rites. Whatever stands in its path should be avoided. (Dvivedi 282)

Kabir, rather, suggested throwing these books in the stream because it was no use pondering over them and acquiring bookish knowledge. Only the letters ‘R’ and ‘M’ which made the word Rama, were all that needed to be learnt, for the word Rama included everything. These Pundits and *purohits* gave lectures for their mercenary considerations. Brahmins who pretended to be well-versed in the scriptures were actually perpetuating lifeless and meaningless rituals. They talked endlessly and advised people but these words had never touched their hearts.

Says Kabir, in vain did they search the depth of the sky:

Never did they meet Him who could cure them of their pride!

(Ramaini 11 Vaudeville 154)

(Keh Kabir Khoje Asmana

So Na Mila Jo Jaye Abhimana.)

Kabir had the power of the tongue with which he persuaded people to stick to the path of integrity without any fear. He did not deviate from his conviction despite being threatened by the Brahmins and even emperor Sikander Lodhi. He advocated simple living and emphasized equality among all human beings. He was totally against any type of religious bigotry. Common people loved his poetry as it relieved them of the cumbersome burdens imposed on their minds by the religious practices of those times. It also had a deeper impact on them as it was composed not in the Sanskrit language which was far from their comprehension but in a language they used in their day-to-day life. “His preference for the common language and mode of expression reflected the objective of reaching out to large number of people, especially the oppressed class to which he belonged.” (Kidwai 165) The composition of the verses in the common language immediately attracted the interest of the ordinary people. His poetry was marked from the images drawn from the simple and natural routine life of the common people and there was as such no artificiality and scholastic learning about them which common people could not understand. Ram Kumar Verma opines,

Kabir has been acknowledged as one of the greatest poets who have given the minutest details of the whole history of human thought which

is amazing and amusing to contemplate upon. The poet does not write but utters and his speech scores much above the authority of all scholarship of written thought. (as quoted by Das xix)

It is very much clear that Kabir was not anxious only about his own salvation but that of his fellowmen whom he loved and sympathized with. But he did not get involved in any of the religious communities. He says:

I bring the message of salvation
to the Hindus and Musalman
And of snapping the bonds of earth
but I am with no one.

(Doha 251, Das 104)

(Hindu Turuk Ke Beech Mai/ Sabad Khun Nirbaan.

Bandhan Kaatu Jagat Ka/ Mai Rehta Rehman.)

Being a low caste weaver and more or less an illiterate, Kabir did not write any of his verses ascribed to him. He composed them orally and they were subsequently written by his disciples. In his verses, he despised the written word, Holy Scriptures in general:

Reading book after book the whole world died
And none ever became learned:
He who can decipher just a syllable of Love,
He is the true Pundit!

(Sakhi 33, Vaudeville 109)

(Pothi Pad Pad Jag Mua/ Pandit Bhya Na Koye.

Dhayi Akhar Prem Ke/ Pade So Pandit Hoye.)

Kabir was highly influenced by the medieval Tantric tradition that had a great contempt for scriptural authority and the written word. The *Siddhas*, Tantrics and the Naths, most of them belonged to the low castes, used to preach in the language of the common people. Kabir also shared their contempt for the sacred Brahmanical language, Sanskrit. The following couplet is traditionally ascribed to him:

Sanskrit is like well-water

And *Bhasha* like the live water of the brook.

(Vaudeville 110)

(*Sanskirit Jal Koop Ha*

Bhasha Behta Neer.)

Kabir composed his verses in the regional languages, sometimes even in particular dialect such as *Avadhi* and *Braj*, so that the tyranny of Sanskrit was broken on one hand and spiritual knowledge became easily accessible to common people on the other hand. As Vaudeville points out, “During the course to the fourteenth to the fifteenth centuries, old *Hindui* or *Khari Boli* had become to be recognized as a *lingua franca* fit for the propagation of popular religious teaching- mostly unorthodox and anti-Brahmanical: one may say that *Hindui* was the language of the Indian Reformation.”(123) Kabir uttered his verses in the language of the illiterate crowds, *lingua franca*, or the language of the bazaar. Through his inspired poetical utterances, he presented to the people the best of the spiritual wisdom contained in Islam and Hinduism, firmly refusing to see them apart. He sought to establish that these two faiths were not essentially different from each other. They offered the same message to Mankind in different words. It was just that their followers could not see the truth, and out of ignorance they fought with one another.

Kabir has remained the voice of the masses, speaking in simple metaphors and most importantly, prompted people to action. In his poetry, he does not sermonize and pontificate, but offers thoughts to consider. He has not only recorded the factual statements of social disparities and social evils in his poetry but has also attempted to strike awareness in the masses for the eradication of those vices. The integration of the society was also one of his motives. In his life time he shunned mindless ritualism,

questioned the establishment, threatened the status quo and paved the path for intellectual revival in society. He subverted the hegemony of mediators of God who kept religion away from the masses. He gave people the idea of believing in a monotheistic supreme authority. This idea touched the hearts of common people belonging to the lower strata of the society and gave them hope of attaining God's blessings without the intervention of any other authority. He broke the shackles of the ritualistic worship by putting an end to the social hierarchies. He obliterated the barriers of caste and religion by making spirituality an experimental reality for the high as well as the low, the rich and the powerful and the poor and helpless. The songs of the Bhakti saint are still on the lips of everyone and this tradition continues even to this day.

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CHAPTER-4

EKAE MAATI KE SAB BHANDHE: RAVI DASS BANI

Ekae Maati Ke Sab Bhandhe

Sab Ka Eko Sirjanhara:

Ravidas Biyape Eko Ghat Bheetar

Sab Ko Ekae Gharre Kumhara.

Guru Ravi Dass has been regarded as one of the great philosophers, reformers and most prominent and well-loved saints of India. He is vastly read and respected poet of the Bhakti movement, especially the *Nirguna Sampradaya* or *Sant Parampara* to which he belonged. Ravi Dass conveys his esoteric message in a simple, unassuming and straightforward manner. The message contained in his verses is meant as a guide for actual practice in life rather than for mere intellectual exercise. His poetry reflects his vision of the social and spiritual needs of the downtrodden and undermines the urgency of their emancipation.

Traditional accounts, both primary and secondary, do not make any direct references regarding the specific dates of his birth and activities. “Little is known about Ravidas’s life and all that we can accept is contained in the occasional references which he makes in his works.” (McLeod 153) Ravi Dass is known by many versions of his name. The name that has been found in the hymns incorporated in the holy *Gurugranthasahib* is ‘Ravidasa’. The version of the name that is found in the *Bhaktamala* of Nabhadasa is ‘Raidasa’. Mirabai, in her hymns, mostly calls him ‘Rohidasa’. The reason for this various versions is because the communication in those days was oral rather than written. Moreover, Ravi Dass is a widely known and respected Saint with followers among people of different regions and languages. So he is remembered by the name best suited to their accent and language.

The exact date of birth of Ravi Dass is somewhat controversial. Although his verses give indication of his birth-place, caste and profession, they contain no information about the actual date of his birth. However, by cross-correlating historical facts connecting with his life, Ravi Dass is said to have been born in 1414 and died in

1540. What seems definite is that Ravi Dass lived a long life during fifteenth and sixteenth century. According to the various sources, it is also ascertained that his father was called Santokh Das and his mother's name was Kalsi Devi. Ravi Dass was said to be born in the family of skin artisans in or around Benaras, the ancient city of Hindus and cypress of high caste Brahmins. Tradition holds that he was a tanner by profession and hence occupied a very low position in the caste hierarchy as the members of his caste handled dead animals, skinned them and processed the skin. The prevalent caste system had come down heavily on them, holding them to be untouchable, denying them the right to education, and imposing heavy penalties on them for any sign of rebellion, making them believe that it was God's and fruit of their own past actions that they were so held in contempt. As Hawley and Juergensmeyer point out:

Though he lived in the fifteenth or sixteenth century, he still qualifies today as a great Untouchable Saint of North India. If one means by Hinduism the religious system whose central rituals are entrusted to Brahmins, whose central institutions require a set of reciprocal but unequal social relationships, and whose guiding ideas set forth what life should be within this hierarchically variegated world and how it may rightly be transcended, then Ravi Dass was not really a Hindu. (10)

Ravi Dass talks about his low caste in the following verses.

My company is low

Day and night I worry.

My action crooked.

My birth, unkind.

(trans. Raga Gauri 1, Sagar 25)

(Meri Sangat Poch Soch Din Rati

Mera Karam Kutilta Janam Kubhanti.)

My caste removes dead cattles

Around Benaras everyday,
Skins them and beats the skin.

(trans. Raga Malaar 1, Sagar 81)

Meri Jaat Kut Bhandhla Dhor Dhvanta
Niteh Banarasi Asa Pasa.)

Ravi Dass was born in the family of leatherworkers, *chamars*, shoemakers, who collected bodies of dead cattle, cut and skinned them, beat and processed the raw skins into usable hides and made them into useful shoes and possibly other leather goods as well. Orthodox Hindus avoided any physical contact with these skins. They believed them to be most contaminated and in case they had to come in any contact with them, they would touch them only with their feet. The reason for this emphasis seems to be the Brahmanic institution of *Varnasramadharm*a according to which the *Shudras* did not have any right to study the sacred scriptures, to perform sacrifices or to take initiation into religious life. The caste system believed to have been created by Brahmins and supported by *Kshatriyas* with physical force was generally accepted as the true order of society at that time. This system, instead of honouring labour considered such a useful occupation to be low and mean and shameful. This belief was so deep rooted in the society that Ravi Dass thought of his actions as crooked and his birth unkind and his family uncultured, even though his actions were socially useful. Here, Ravi Dass seemed to have accepted the prevalent caste system, though it was personally hurtful to him and he wanted to escape his hurt. Here, he did not boldly stand up and rejected the caste system but prayed to God not to forget him as his servant. He prays:

God! Lord of the earth!

Life of the living!

Forget me not

I am your servant.

Remove my suffering

Make me a good man.

I won't leave your feet

Though my body may leave tomorrow.

(trans. Raga Gauri Guarari 1, Sagar 25)

*(Ram Gussayian Jee Ke Jeevana/ Mohe na Bisaro Mai Jan
Tera*

*Meri Harahu Bipat Jan Karhu Subha Charan Na Chhadao
Sarir Kal Jai.)*

Ravi Dass prayed to God to remove his suffering which seemed to have resulted from social injustice of the caste system and wrong values attached to socially useful work. He found escape from this kind of suffering through the devotion of God, or getting absorbed in constructive service that supported living beings and this would make him a good man who did not suffer. He adopted the traditional way of abolishing the caste system through remembering God's name.

Ravi Dass says, he who keeps God in mind

Has nothing to do with caste or birth or rebirth.

(Raga Basant, Sagar 79)

*(Keh Ravidass Jo Jape Naam/ Tis Jaat Na Janam Na Joni
Kaam.)*

By becoming God's courtier or a *Sant* for whom the caste system does not exist, or getting enlightened, Ravi Dass rejected false identifications with social categories.

Sant Ravi Dass frequently used the word *chamar* (tanner) for himself. As Prof. Jagwinder Singh points out in his essay that the word "*chamar*" carries the ironic tone of the speaker:

This seems a kind of self-stigmatizing approach. But it is mocking in tone and at the conceptual level he is displacing any such categorization on the basis of

caste. Ravi Dass is reaccentuating the same words which he had to struggle with throughout his life. His words are the parodic use of the Brahmanic definitions of social hierarchy which contains all roots of inequality among men. The repetition of an image of Brahmanic instructions which formed the classes based on caste. But, from larger perspective this self-stigmatizing notion (revolt) is decentring such ideology of caste system. (Singh, Jaswinder 148)

According to the tradition, Ravi Dass is said to be the disciple of *Vaishnava* teacher, Ramananda. He is also considered as one of the contemporaries of Kabir. However, there is great uncertainty regarding the dates of Kabir and Ramananda. There are forty verses included in the *Adi Granth* that are considered as an authentic source of information to study Ravi Dass and establish his socio-religious and political concerns. Though Ravi Dass like Kabir is also presumed to be the follower of Ramananda, but scholars like McLeod do not seem to agree with this. He writes:

The tradition that he was a disciple of Ramananda must be rejected. The traditional link between Ramananda and Kabir is barely plausible on chronological grounds and it is evident that Raidas was younger than Kabir. This is the conclusion which is indicated by the references which he makes to Kabir and it places him beyond the time of Ramananda. (155)

Ravi Dass mentioned the names of his seniors, in his verses, who got salvation irrespective of their birth in the low castes. It is quite evident from his verses that Kabir, Namdev, Trilochan, Sadna and Sena were his contemporaries in later years.

Ravi Dass came to be regarded as a great religious teacher even during his life time. Some of his contemporary saints proclaimed him to be a great saint in their devotional verses. The authors of all the legendary and semi-legendary accounts of the religious leaders in later medieval periods provide gratuitously a respectable place to Ravi Dass in their writings. Kabir also referred and appreciated Ravi Dass in his *saloka* when he declared: *Santan Mein Ravidas Sant* (Among Saints, Ravi Dass is the true Saint). There is a mention of a dialogue between Kabir and Ravi Dass and it seems possible because both the saints flourished in the same geographical region. Ravi Dass expressed in his hymns great admiration for *Bhakat* Kabir. Kabir also

cherished the same regards for the saintliness and spiritual perfection of *Sant Ravi Dass*. Kabir sings:

It is but folly to ask what the caste of a saint may be;
The barber has sought God, the washerwoman, and the
carpenter-
Even Raidas was a seeker after God.
The *Rishi* Swapacha was a tanner by caste.
Hindus and Muslims alike have achieved that End,
Where remains no mark of distinction.

(Poem 2, Tagore 2)

*(Santan Jaat Na Puchho Nirguniya,
Sadhae Naau, Sadhae Dhobi/ Saadh Jaat Ha Bariyan.
Sadhna Mein Raidass Sant Ha/ Supach Rishiyon Bhangiya.
Hindu Turuk Dui Din Bane Ha/ Kuchh Nahi Pehchaniya.)*

At another place Kabir placed Ravi Dass among those great saints who had tasted the nectar of divine Truth:

Do not follow the mirage on foot,
But thirst for the nectar;
Dhruva, Prahlad, and Shukadeva have drunk of it
and also Raidasa has tasted it.

(Poem 61, Tagore 60)

*(Mrig Trishna- Jal Chhaad Banvare/ Karo Sudharas Asa
Dhruv, Parhlaad, Shukadev Piya/ Aur Piya Raidassa.)*

Darshan singh in his book has quoted Nabhadass in which latter devotes one *chaupai* to Ravi Dass in his *Bhakatmala*:

The immaculate verses of Raidasa are capable of cutting the knot of doubt,

His sayings are in accordance with the ethics of the revealed texts.

His verses are professed by the people who are like geese which separate water from milk

By the grace of God he attained liberation in his life.

Sitting on the highest throne of truth, he sets an example of wisdom and faith

Casting away their pride of *varna* and *asrama* people come to touch his feet

The immaculate verses of Raidasa are capable of cutting the knot of doubt.

(Singh, Darshan 13)

(Sandeh Granth Khandan Nipun Bani Vimal Raidass Ki

Sadachar Sruti Shastar Vachan Avirudh Ucharyo

Neer Kheer Vibran Param Hansan Urdharyo

Bhagvat Kripa Parshad Parmgat It Tan Payi

Raaj Singhaasan Baith Gyat Parteet Dikhayi

Varnashram Abhimaan Taj Pad Raj Bandeh Jaas Ki

Sandeh Granth Khandan Nipun Bani Vimal Raidass Ki.)

Ravi Dass was such an exceptional poet-singer that the high caste Brahmins also became attracted and used to come and hear him singing hymns. He was socially untouchable, and then learned priests bowed to him ceremoniously. He was slandered

by organizers of religion, and then they carried him in a palanquin on their shoulders. Ravi Dass's poetry had such powerful aura and charm that Brahmins nodded their heads before him that was totally opposite to the socio-religious sentiments and conventions of his time. In his verses, Ravi Dass emphatically maintained that he belonged to the *Shudra* caste and by his devotion to God and the grace of the Lord he was raised to the highest spiritual realms. In his hymns the saint emphatically though humbly asserted the *Shudra's* right to the freedom of worship, which unfortunately was denied to them.

Low my caste, low, my family,

Lowly is my birth!

I take refuge in you, Ram !

Says Ravi Dass, who works on leather.

(Raga Sorath vi, Sagar 51)

(Meri Jaat Kamini, Paat Kamini/ Ochhaa janam Hamara

Tum Sharnagit Raja Ram Chand/ Kahe Ravidass Chamara.)

... ..

Now chief scholars prostrate to him

Ravi Dass the servant has taken refuge in His name.

(Raga Malaar 1, Sagar 51)

(Ab Bipar Pardhaan Tehe Kareh Dandyot,

Tere Naam Sarnaye Ravidass Dasa.)

It is evident from the above verse that being born in the low caste, he was recurrently opposed by the Brahmins and met with persistent antagonism from the high castes. Brahmins scorned him for being born in the lower caste and regarded him uncertificated to pray and being loyal to God with such high devotion. Sermonizing and practicing saintliness and holiness by a low caste cordwainer was considered the most profane act in those times. Brahmins felt threatened by his high devotion to God

and had to recognize the futility of their rituals. For this, Ravi Dass was recurrently opposed by the Brahmins and met with persistent antagonism from the priestly class. Yet Guru Ravi Dass had a tremendous impact on society that people from all the classes came to listen to him and became his disciples. He was brave enough that instead of feeling ashamed of his so called lower status he openly acknowledged being a cobbler. This was a radical act at a time when the prevailing caste system did not allow people of the Dalit Community to walk with their heads high. Often people who were treated as untouchables tried to hide their caste to avoid being ashamed and harassed. Ravi Dass believed that they were not less than others as they earned their livelihood through hard work.

Ravi Dass meditated on succeeding in his life in spite of belonging to the low caste. He kept motivating himself by drawing inspiration from the examples of people who were saved though they belonged to the low caste and violated the rules of caste. First of all, Ravi Dass thought of the Brahmins, of people of high caste families, who were engaged in six duties prescribed in scriptures. He says:

Doing six actions of a high family,

Giving and receiving knowledge, sacrifice and charity,

If one is not devoted to god in the heart,

Not feeling for His lotus feet, or His story,

Then one is like consumer of dead.

(Raga Kedara, Sagar 75)

(Khat Karam Kul Sanjugat Ha/ Hari Bhagti Hirday Nahi

Charnarbind Na Katha Bhave/ Supach Tul Samman.)

Ravi Dass downsized Brahmins by showing their hypocrisy or lack of integrity in so far as their good actions did not reflect a good heart. Such learned scholars were just like the lowest caste of the people, who ate the meat of dogs, or dead bodies, since their motivations and emotions were uncultured. Therefore, the difference between the high and the low caste disappeared. Ravi Dass directed his

forgetful mind to remember and seek inspiration from the past examples of low caste people who had union with God because of their strong devotion to Him.

O forgetful mind, remember, contemplate!

Why not see Balmeek?

From what caste did he rise to what status,

Because of his special devotion to Ram?

.....

Ajaimal, who broke the rules of caste,

Pingala, the prostitute who turned devotee of god,

The hunter, who took life,

The divine, who was condemned to be an elephant.

All reached god.

When such evil minds succeed,

Why won't you be saved, Ravi Dass?

(Raga Kedara, Sagar 75)

(Re Chit Chet Chet Achet/ Balmeek Ko Dekh Re

Jaati Te Koi Pad Nahi Pahucha/ Ram Bhagti Bisekh Re.

.....

Ajamal Pingula Lubhat Kunchar/ Gaye Hari Ke Pass

Aisae Durmat Nistare/ Tu Kyu Na Tareh Ravidass.)

It seemed that Ravi Dass also listened to the *Puranic* stories and folk legends that were common during that period. Ravi Dass had the anxiety about his caste and his struggle against it for his spiritual evolution and divine achievement. But he did not lose hope and felt encouraged by these stories from *Mahabharata* and *Puranas*

that showed that a Brahmin, the learned scholar, without the devotion of God is worse than a *chandal* (lowest untouchable caste) and a low caste with loving devotion to the Supreme God was superior to a Brahmin. He says:

Whose touch unclean the world, him you bless!

The lowly you raise, my God, and fear not anyone!

(Raga Maru 1, Sagar 73)

(Jaa Ki Chhot Jagat Ko Lage/ Ta Par Tuhi Dharae.

Nichae Oonch Kare Mera Govind/ Kahu Te Na Darae.)

Mirabai, the Rajasthani Rajput Princess, the great woman saint of the royal family of *Cittor*, most probably was disciple of Ravi Dass. In the hymns attributed to Mirabai, it is affirmed that Ravi Dass initiated her in to spiritual life. In another legend, Queen Jhali of *Cittor*, impressed by the saintliness of Ravi Dass, came to *Kashi* and professed him as her preceptor. The Brahmins accompanying her felt so indignant that they complained to the king against the queen. The king, at the advice of the learned counsellors invited Ravi Dass and a great feast was arranged where the Brahmins were also invited to join with the Saint. The Brahmins refused to eat with him and made their own arrangements to prepare their food. To everyone's surprise, they found Ravi Dass sitting between each pair of them. They repented for their behaviour and became his disciples.

Despite his poverty, Guru Ravi Dass was well known for his hospitality to saints, *sadhus* and the poor. Once a holy man visited his place, and Guru Ravi Dass as usual offered him the warmest hospitality and gave him all comforts. Seeing Guru's utterly impoverished condition and being pleased with his hospitality and devotion, the holy man offered him a Philosopher's Stone, which could immediately transform his shoe making tools into gold and remove his poverty once and for all. Guru politely refused to accept the gift. The holy man put the stone in the thatched roof of hut of Guru Ravi Dass and went away. It is said that the holy man returned after thirteen months and saw Guru in the same impoverished state. He found the stone lying at the same place. Seeing the utter contentment and detached attitude of Guru Ravi Dass, the

holy man was dumbfounded. The following verse very beautifully communicates the attitude of Ravi Dass.

Not the slightest liking have I for the philosopher's stone;

It causes entanglement in the world.

Giving up all cravings, I fix my mind

Only the holy feet of the Lord alone, says Ravi Dass.

(Upadhya 12)

(Parchae Ram Rave Jau Koyi/ Paras Parsae Dubida Na Hoyi

*Tujhae Charan Arbind Bhavan Man/ Paan Karat Payiyo
Payoyo Ramyiya Dhan.)*

The Brahmins of Kashi were highly inflamed by the growing popularity of Guru Ravi Dass as a great lover and devotee of God and in order to avert him from worshipping God they approached the king. Being born in the *chamar* family, Ravi Dass's action of deep devotion to the Almighty was considered to be appalling. Ravi Dass upheld devotion as the sole determinant of one's true worth and as the most efficacious means of obtaining ultimate liberation. He rejected the power and status accruing by virtue of one's position at birth in the Hindu caste. An idol of the deity was kept in the king's palace. The image of God was to be drawn, one by one, by both the devotees by their power of devotion. The Brahmins failed to move the idol of their deity by reciting their Vedic Mantras. When it was the turn of Guru Ravi Dass, he prayed to God:

There is none poorer than I,

More compassionate than you.

Now, why test me any further?

Your words my mind believes.

Make your servant perfect.

(Raga Dhanasari 1, Sagar 53)

(Hum Sar Deen, Dyaal Na Tum Sar/ Ab Patiyar Kya Kije

Bachani Torr, Mor Mann Mane/ Jann ko Puran Kije.)

Surprisingly to all the high caste priests, Guru Ravi Dass had the image of God in his lap. The Brahmins who wanted to humiliate the low born cobbler felt defeated and had to carry Ravi Dass in a palanquin through the crowded city of Benaras. The following verse of Guru Ravi Dass hints at this incident where the Lord turns the lowliest in to the highest with his Supreme power:

Who other than you can do such a thing, O my Lord?

Merciful to the poor is my Lord

You have placed a canopy over my head.

On such a one as me

Whose touch defiles the world,

You alone can bestow your grace.

My Lord turns the lowliest into highest and fears none.

(Upadhya 77)

(Aaisi Laal Tujh Bin Kaun Kare

Garib Nivaaz Gussayiaan Mera Maathe Chhattar Kare,

Jaa Ki Chhot Jagat Kau Laage/ Taa Par Tuhi Dhare

Nichae Ooch Kare Mera Gobind/ Kahu Te Na Dare.)

In another provocation made by the Brahmins, Ravi Dass was asked to demonstrate the ability of his *Shaligram* to float on the holy waters of Ganges. Ravi Dass had no *Shaligram* but only the stone he used to repair and mend the shoes. This stone meant to Ravi Dass what *Shaligram* meant to Brahmins as it was this stone which helped him earn his livelihood. Therefore, he used to call it his *shaligram*. The Brahmins tossed their respective *Shaligrams* in the waters of river Ganges, and to their surprise they all sank. When Guru Ravi Dass threw his *shaligram* in the water, it

remained afloat. Hence, the Brahmins who were trying to embarrass and belittle Guru Ravi Dass were themselves ashamed. In the following verse, Ravi Dass implies to the bragging provocation of the Brahmins:

Ravi Dass, the humble one, speaks the truth.

Reflecting on the true knowledge,

Fix your mind on the holy feet of the Lord

And take shelter under him

They pluck leaves and perform worship,

And call the idol ‘the one takes souls

Across the ocean of existence.’

If God resides in the idol, they say

Then it should surely float on water.

(Upadhya 15)

(Bapuro Satt Ravidass Kahae Re

Gian Bichar Charan Chit Lavae/ Har Ki Sarani Rahae Re

Paati Torre Pooj Rachave/ Taran Tiran Kahae Re

Moorat Mahin Basae Parmeshar/ Tau Pani Mahin Tirae Re.)

There are various miracles and stories associated with the name of Guru Ravi Dass which prove the glory and greatness of Guru Ravi Dass’ simple path of love and devotion for God and expose the absurdity of traditional caste superiority and external observances of the high caste priests which were prevent in those times. All these folk legends about Ravi Dass prove him as a religious and social hero of his times. The followers and disciples of Guru Ravi Dass have tried to establish him as the parallel hero of the medieval times when there was nobody to challenge the supremacy of the priests. In those times, bringing God to the doors of the poor and the down trodden by paving on the path of *bhakti* and total surrender to God, Guru Ravi Dass became the

hero of the downtrodden and marginalized section of the society. The literary portrait of Guru Ravi Dass is intended to inspire the common man to the higher values of life. All these legends are intentionally woven around Guru Ravi Dass to make his teachings useful in the realization of spiritual goals. Moreover these references though of legendary nature, are of great importance in the reconstruction of the life and religious beliefs of Guru Ravi Dass and also highlight the socio-cultural ideology of the medieval period. Peter Friedlander states:

Ravi Dass' hagiographies, though authored long after he died, depict a struggle within the Indian society, whereas Ravi Dass' life gives a meaning to express a variety of social and spiritual themes. At one level, it depicts a struggle between the then prevalent heterodox communities and the orthodox Brahmanical tradition. At another level, the legends are an inter-communal, inter-religious struggle with an unending search and desire for social unity. At yet another level, the stories describe the spiritual struggle of an individual unto self. (106)

The Poetry ascribed to Ravi Dass shows contempt for the hierarchical social order of the caste system. The contemporary adherents of Ravi Dass challenge the hegemonic power of the dominant castes and express a dissident socio-religious ideology. There is a strong anti-Brahmanical tone that pervades much of poetry of Ravi Dass. The myths associated with Guru Ravi Dass cannot be segregated from the power-politics of that period and they also contain powerful components socio-religious enlightenment by the marginalized sections of the society during the Islamic rule. Joseph Schaller remarks:

The contemporary adherents of the Ravi Dass Panth who are overwhelmingly from *Chamar* or other untouchable and marginal caste backgrounds, utilize the elements of socio-religious dissent expressed in Ravi Dass 'poetry and teachings to formulate their own message(s) to protest against the iniquitous position they occupy in the caste hierarchy. (106)

In all these hagiographical tales of his life, Ravi Dass is depicted as the locus of inestimable grace, power and majesty who helps ferry his devotees over the ocean of existence. In these tales, Brahmins who often arrayed against him are generally portrayed as hypocritical and dishonest opponents who are incapable of defeating him

no matter what ruse they might employ. In the stories about Ravi Dass, there is an air of defiance to Brahmins that comes through even in the sanitized versions. These stories, in fact, centre on conflicts with Brahmins. The Brahmins are depicted, with some sarcasm, as greedy, constantly hungry, and profiteering from their religious monopoly and hysterical about having been questioned by low caste man. The incidents also point to the diminishing power of the Brahmins in northern India.

Guru Ravi Dass belonged to a society that was cruel and crude that had yet to learn sympathy and responsibility for the poor, the down trodden, the peripheral existence on the fringes of society. It is likely that the work done by Ravi Dass and many others like him contributed to a change in the social attitudes towards the poor, who could rise higher through their spiritual efforts. Ravi Dass chose to aspire higher than what his circumstances permitted him and he succeeded.

Ravi Dass was a practical householder. In order to lead his religious life he never repudiated his vocation of mending shoes and leather work. While he looked to be managing his household duties and occupation outwardly but he was always engrossed in his loving devotion to God. He has set an example of decorum that every occupation whether low or high is respectful and ethical if accomplished sincerely and with earnest devotion. He says:

My inner tongue is constantly preoccupied

With repeating God's Name

And my hands are constantly engaged

In doing my work.

Thus have I become carefree,

God will take care of me, says Ravidas.

(Upadhya 125)

(Jihva Bhaje Hari Naam Nit/ Hath Kareh Nit Kaam

Ravidass Bhaye Nih Chit Hum/Mum Chit Karege Ram.)

Ravi Dass gave a distinctive blend of loyalty to God and commitment to the society. He was married at the very early age and was turned out of the house by his father because he found Ravi Dass unprofitable in the family business. Ravi Dass built his own hut and started living there with his wife, earning his life by making shoes. The meagre income that he saved by making shoes was spent in the service of the holy persons. Even in the period of abject poverty, he led a very contented and devoted life. His main business was his trade in the name of Rama, or the one present everywhere.

A prayer to the One present everywhere

Protect my wealth, O God!

Is there a trader in God?

Take along my merchandise!

I am a trader in God.

My trade is peace of mind.

I carry the wealth of Name of God.

The world carries poison.

(Raga Gauri Bairagan1, Sagar 27)

(Rammayiye Sio Ik Benati/ Meri Poonji Raakh Muraar

Ko Banjaro Raam Ko/ Mera Tanda Ladya Jaye Re.

Hau Banjaro Ram Ko/ Sahaj Karo Bapaar

Main Ram Nam Dhun Ladhya/ Bikh Ladi Sansaar.)

The name of Rama was the only treasure or wealth that he had found in a larger sense. His treasure was not money that the world pursued so hotly.

Like Sant Kabir, Guru Ravi Dass did not seem to have any formal education and traditional schooling. The scholars have not been able to trace any manuscript copy of hymns written in his own hands and it seems likely that he did not write down

his compositions. He used to recite his hymns among his followers at the time of congregation. His collection of verses is a great storehouse of a vast knowledge of different forms and dialects of Indian regional languages that are replete with references to Hindu religious lore. His knowledge was derived mainly from the company of the holy people, from his travels in different states of northern India, and above all, from his inner spiritual experiences. In his verses, he talked about the uselessness of the bookish knowledge and yearned for the education in the school of God. He was not in favour of the study of the scriptures. According to him, studying could be useful only if the heart came in direct contact with the essence of the words. He says:

Men read, study, and hear all god's names,
Yet God's designs are not known.
How shall iron become pure gold
unless it is touched by the Philosopher's stone.

(cited in Darshan Singh. 89)

*(Parriye Gunniye Naam Sabh Suniye Anubhav Bhaav Na Darsa
Loha Kanchan hiran Hoye Kaisae Jo Parsahe Na Parse.)*

According to Guru Ravi Dass, the traditional teaching did not dispel the doubts from the mind of the people. The Brahmins recited the *Vedas* and *mantras* from the Holy Scriptures and interpreted them in their own way. They were not clear about the ideas conveyed by the holy books. Listening to the *Vedas* and *Puranas* did not satisfy the needs of the heart. There always remained so many doubts. He says:

Thinking of actions prescribed, prohibited.
Listening to the Vedas and Puranas,
Doubt arises.
Doubt always stays in the heart.
How to remove pride.

(Raga Gauri Bairagan 11, Sagar 31)

(Karam Akaram Bichariye/ Sanka Sun Bed Puraan

Sansa Sad Hirday Base/ Kaun Hire Abhimaan.)

In another verse, he says:

Several stories, Puranas, Veds, techniques

Are written in thirty four letters of the alphabet.

Beas thought and declared the supreme aim of life to be

Refuge in the name of God.

(Raga Sorath IV, Sagar 49)

(Nana Khiyaan Puraan, Bed, Bidh/ Chauntis Akhhar Mahi

Beas Bichaar Kahio Parmarth/ Ram Naam Sar Nahi.)

Ravi Dass has appeared as an intimidating challenge to the ascendancy of the Brahmins and stood for the integrity and cause of the oppressed and subjugated sections of the society by the Brahmanical hegemony. He criticized all the Brahmanical sacred texts openly as all these *Vedas* and *Puranas* encouraged the supremacy of the priestly class and prompted inequity and exploitation of the downtrodden in the society. He proclaimed that all *Vedas* are worthless.

The Brahmins of Ravi Dass' times always asserted that the *Vedas* and other sacred texts and scriptures were impeccable and depository of veracity and comprehension. Ravi Dass openly attacked the psychical hegemony of these Brahmins and exhibited the misconceptions of their advocacy. He made extensive attempts to dispense an uncomplicated socio-religious replacement to the labour classes that would quest for impartiality for all and needed no religious practices.

The Bhakti movement led a relentless attack on the excess of Brahmanic ritualism, *Karamakanda*, and the rigid caste system. *Bhakti* substituted for complicated religious rituals and synthesis was preferred to scholastic dogmatism. Those who preferred *bhakti* was considered superior to those who followed the path

of knowledge irrespective of their birth. Whereas the verses of the saint-poets give us an account of the religious degeneration of the Hindus and Muslims of the times, there is also a mention of the religious rituals and practices which were prevalent in the country. The holy city of Kashi in fifteenth century was a hot-bed of *Pundits* and Brahmins. Theological debates and idol worship was rampant. These rituals had been ordained by the Holy Scriptures. But the common people were exploited in the name of religion and in many cases the religion had degenerated into mere forms and ceremonies. The priests who conducted the form or forms of worship kept their material gain in view. The Brahmin was supposed to be the custodian of religion in Hindu society. The Brahmin priest was the central figure in every rite and ceremony and accepted due or undue charity, which was the cause of his moral degeneration. The Brahmin priests had read the *Vedas* and the scriptures, but had not imbibed the ideals, nor did they practice the virtues preached there in. The *Vedas* had been divided into three parts according to the subject matter.

1. *Karama Kand* or the part dealing with rituals.
2. *Upasana Kand* or the part dealing with the methods of worship.
3. *Gyan Kand* or the part giving knowledge about the realization of God.

The Brahmins laid stress on the first two because it helped to maintain their importance. They prescribed defined deeds and practices of worshipping conforming to the sacred texts to cleanse their minds but actually they themselves were not clear about the purity of the soul. They did not show much interest in the *Gyan Kand* because they themselves were shallow and never practiced for the attainment of higher spiritual plains.

According to the division of Karma, there were four original castes. Brahmins, *Kshatriyas* and *Viashyas* were known as *Dvijas* or twice born. The word *Dvija* means the second birth. The first birth denoted the normal birth from the womb of the mother and the second birth indicated that birth which the spiritual teacher acquired for them. The initiation ceremony and reciting the mantras were permitted only to the *Dvijas*. There are references in saint-poetry to the form and mode of worship practiced by the priests. They used to gather in the temple in the morning and evening to make their offerings of flowers and food stuffs. In the evening, there was a display of lights combined with the offering of flowers and devotional singing. In his poetry, Ravi

Dass mentions a number of customary rituals that people used to perform in his times. People went on pilgrimages to sixty eight sacred centres at different places in the country. They had ritual baths to remove their sins. They worshipped *Shivlings*, or holy stones symbolizing creativity, at twelve different places. Such rituals were engaged in acts of charity like constructing wells and tanks for public welfare. Some people performed rituals like *Aarti* which required having a bath as a symbolic gesture of purifying oneself before appearing in the presence of the Lord. The ritual of *Aarti* also included activities like sitting on the special prayer seat, grinding and applying sandal wood on one's brow, mixing saffron in water for sprinkling on the idol of the God and placing a garland of flowers around the idol and lighting a lamp and waving it before the idol of deity. Such rituals constituted a symbolic language only vaguely understood by the believing devotee.

Ravi Dass preached all his fellowmen to focus on the worship of Almighty and dispose all their uncertainties, hesitations and suspicions as contemplation of God was the only adulation that a true devotee can make to the Almighty

Thy name, God, is mine Aarti and my ablutions:

Without the name of God all display is vain.

Thy name is my prayer-mat, Thy name my saffron grater,

Thy name the saffron which I sprinkle for Thee;

Thy name is the water, Thy name the sandal, the repetition of

Thy name is grating thereof; taking it I offer it unto Thee;

Thy name is the lamp, Thy name the wick,

Thy name the oil I pour therein;

.....

Saith Rav Das, Thy name is the Aarti:

the true name is the food I offer unto Thee, O God.

(M.A. Macauliffe Vol. 6: 333)

*(Naam Tero Aarti Majan Murare/ Har Ke Naam Bin Jhoothe
Sagal Pasare.*

*Naam Tero Aasano, Naam Tero Ursa/ Naam Tero Kesaro Le
Chhitkare.*

*Naam Tero Ambhla, Naam Tero Chandano/ Ghas Jape Naam le Yujhe
Kau Chare.*

Naam Tera Diva, Naam Tero Bati/ Naam Tero Tel Le Meh Pasare.

Naam Tero Ki Jot Lagayi/ Bhayio Ujyaro Bhavan Saglare.

Naam Tero Dhaga , Naam Phool Mala/ Bhaar Atharae Sagal Juthare.

.....

Kahe Ravidass Naam Tero Aarti/ Satnaam Ha Har Bhog Tuhare.)

Ravi Dass took up various details of the rituals of *Aarti* and equated each detail with *Nam*, thus enacting an atmosphere of oneness and absence of differentiation of one detail from another. Ravi Dass believed that except the *Nam* of God, *Hari*, all the details of the universe were false being only apparent limitations and differentiations of the same God. The *Aarti* carried a simple message of true love and devotion to God. Sant Ravi Dass preached that an honest and pure heart was enough to worship the Almighty. There was no further need of any earthly materials and rituals to worship God. One's true love and devotion were the true materials to offer and rituals to perform in the eyes of Ravi Dass. He recounted various materials and rituals which were used in a formal Hindu worship. Sant Ravi Dass substituted all these materials and rituals with his devotional remembrance of God.

Sant Ravi Dass wrote critically of rituals of *Aarti*, the ceremony of waving of the lamp in front of the idol of the God or Goddess. His song was not dissimilar to those used in *Aarti* in the mainstream tradition. But the message of this *Aarti* poem contradicted the custom of *Aarti* and suggested that performing *Aarti* was a part of sanctimonious process. Ravi Dass writes:

What have you brought for Aarti, what do you see?

It astonishes your servant and slave!
 You have made fifty-two golden lamps-
 Fool, you have not even glimpsed renunciation!
 The brilliance of His hair is ten million suns-
 How can you perform His Aarti with smoke and fire?
 The five elements and three guns of Maya-
 Whatever is visible is all His creation.
 Raidas says, I have seen within,
 All your fames cannot equal a single hair. (Callewaert 159)
(Aarti ka Le Kar Jove Sewag Dass Achambhe Hove
Banvan Kanchan Deep Ghdavae Jad Bairaag Drishti Na Aave
Kot Bhan Jaki Sobha Rumein Kha Aarti Agni Re Dhumein
Panch Tat Aru triguni Maya Jo Dise So Sakal Upaya
Kahe Raidass Main Deshya Mahi Sakleh Jot Rom Sam Nahi.)

In Hindu form of worshipping, these rituals and materials were not randomly used but they were indispensable part of Hindu form of prayer. These were used according to the prescribed instructions by their authoritative Hindu scriptures. “Sant Ravi Dass is not recounting the names of these rituals and materials merely to describe a religion’s way of worshipping. The notion behind creating such images of other ideological systems is to directly address the ruling voices. His recounting of the ritualistic and formalistic method of prayer is intentional and based on his empirical experience of his times.” (as quoted by Jaswinder Singh 149)

The medieval period was also known as a period of restrictions and rigid observations of caste professions. During those times, even reciting a prayer by any low caste or *Shudra* was strongly forbidden. The old scriptures and their subsequent forms had strongly divided the society according to different castes and their

respective professions. The low castes were strongly forbidden to enter the temples and offer prayers. It becomes a matter of surprise and courage as Sant Ravi Dass, for being a low caste, not only taught natural way to cherish God, but also conveyed his stern disagreement with the ritualistic and idolatry way of worshipping God.

A low caste Sant is teaching a right method of paying “ablutions”. A low caste Sant attempts to correct what is pointless and meaningless. This reversing of role reflects the ground figure dialogic metaphor where the dialogue between centre and margin continues and no one takes a privilege position. (150)

Ravi Dass’s reference to such practices was to expose the inherent duplicity and insignificance. He questioned the blind faith and rituals and educated the masses against following them.

The outer play of religiosity, according to Ravi Dass, was hypocritical. God could neither be deceived by insincere displays nor pleased by external observances. The priestly class who made outer displays and practiced external rituals simply created a barrier between himself and God. Deluded himself, he created delusion in others. According to Ravi Dass, all modes of external observances and rituals, being rooted in delusion, were worthless and misleading. They could only strengthen our bond to the world but and could never take us to God. Ravi Dass defiantly criticized the religious imposition and various externalities like priesthood, rituals, pilgrimages etc. He says:

The priest has put a barrier between himself and God.

Shaving his head and performing external services and worship

His bonds of delusion are strong indeed.

He adorns himself impressively

With sandalwood marks and rosaries,

Thus placing a veritable noose of death around himself.

(Upadhya 32)

(Paande! Har Vich Antar Dadha

Mund Mundavai Sewa Puja Bhram Ka Bandhan Gaadha.

Mala Tilak Mannohar Banno Laggo Janm Ki Passi

Jo Har Saiti Jorryo Chaho/ To Jag So Raho Udasi.)

Ravi Dass deprecated outward ostentation and affectation which had undermined the spirit and true message of religion. Through his teachings, he tried to drive home the fact that all these external observances deviate the ignorant and innocent people from the right path. As a result, they were misled either by ill-informed priests or by their own prejudices, religious dogmas or traditional superstitions. Instead of trying to find God within them, where he could actually be found, they searched for him outside in mountains, forests, places of pilgrimage and temples, and engaged themselves in various external rituals and ceremonies. Guru Ravi Dass made it clear that all outer searches were futile and useless because God resided within us. He exposed the futility of outer search and says:

Why do you go out and seek him in the forest?

The Lord is not hiding from you.

God dwells with in all, O Ravidas;

All pervasive is He.

(84)

(Ban Khojan Ka Jaye Re/ Ram To Alopa Nah.

Sarv Biapi Ram To/ Ravidas Sabhan Ke Mah.)

In another verse he says:

The One in search of whom

You go to Ka'aba and Kailash

That beloved Lord dwells

In your heart, says Ravidas.

(81)

(Kaabe Aur Kailash Mein / Jih Ko Dhundhan Jah

Ravidas Pyara Ram To/ Baithae Man Mah.)

Ravi Dass never approved the idol worship as practiced by the Hindus. He spoke of the futility of the offering of the flowers to the lifeless idols. He says:

You pluck leaves, perform worship

And talk of the stone idol as the one that takes you

Across the ocean of existence

But if God truly resides in the idol,

Then surely it should float on water.

(120)

(Pati Torre Pooj Rachave/ Taran Tiran Kahae Re

Moorat Mahin Basae Parmeshar/ Tau Pani Mahin Tirae Re.)

Ravi Dass not only questioned the rituals of worship wide spread in his society but was also personally concerned with questions of ritualistic purity, since he belonged to a caste which was thought of by the upper castes to be impure. If Ravi Dass was an untouchable, because he was impure, so were the ceremonious offerings to the idol of God impure and untouchable. Thus, he generalized the defect imputed to him. He posed the questions:

Mother, she asks, with what can I worship?

All the pure is impure. Can I offer milk?

The calf has dirtied it in sucking its mother's teat.

Water, the fish have muddied; flowers, the bees

No other flowers could be offered than these.

The sandalwood tree, where the snake has coiled, is spoiled.

The same act formed both nectar and poison.

Everything's tainted-candles, incense, rice-
But still I can worship with my body and my mind
And I have the Guru's grace to find the formless Lord.
Rituals and offerings- I can't do any of these.
What, says Ravidas, will you with me?

(Hawley 26)

*(Doodh Te Bachhvae Thanu Bitariyo/ Phool Bhavar, Jal Meen
Bigariyo.*

*Mayi Gobind Puja Kha Le Charavau/ Avar Na Phool, Anoop
Na Pavau.*

Mailagar Bere Ha Bhuianga/ Bikh Amrit Basai Ik Sanga.

Dhoop Deep Naibedhe Basa/ Kaise Pooj Kare Teri Dasa.

Tan Man Arpau Pooj Chravau/ Gur parsaad Niranjana Pahvau.

Puja Archa Ahi Na Tori/ Kahe Ravidass Kavan Gat Mori.)

In ritualistic worship of God, water, flowers and milk were offered to an idol along with chants of mantras in praise of the Lord. But none of these offerings were ever pure, although the worshipper believed them to be pure. Ravi Dass challenged the very concept of purity and pollution in the ritualistic form of worship. During the *Aarti* ceremony, substances like flower petals, *kesar*, earthen lamp, *dhupa*, *deep*, *ghee*, etc. were taken in the purest form to be offered to the idol. For the rituals of worship, Ravi Dass had nothing to offer, no customary offerings like milk, flowers, water, incense, lamps, even though they became pure after they were offered to God, like the impure paper made out of palm leaves becomes pure after the praise of God is written on them. Ravi Dass chose to dedicate himself in the service of God as the only worth offering.

Ravi Dass disregarded the idea of taking dip at the holy rivers to remove the dirty sins that we commit in our lives. He realized that one could not become pure by

washing one's body in the sacred rivers. He stated that purity of this kind was like the elephant's wash that immediately sprinkled dust on him after he had washed himself:

Outside is washed clean with water

Inside are many types of sins.

But how to be pure, when purity is like the elephant's wash?

(Raga Gauri Bairagan-11, Sagar 31)

(Bahar Udak Pakhariye/ Ghat Bhitari Bibidh Bikaar.

Sudh Kavan Par Hoyibo/ Such Kunchar Bidh Biyohar.)

Ravi Dass rejected the idea of taking ablutions in the so called holy waters and keep on performing evil deeds as usual. Moreover, the outer bathing could not wash off the blemishes lodged in the mind.

The basis of Brahmin supremacy over all others was established through control over the all important sacrifices. The Vedic Brahmins contended that it was from a cosmic and primordial sacrifice that the universe was created, and it was because of the repeated sacrifices that the universe continued. Here, the logic of the Brahmins was quite clear: by presiding over the sacrifice the Brahmin acted as a mediator between the divine deities above and the men below, and, thus, kept the world going. So anyone who was desirous of well-being should turn to the Brahmin who would offer sacrifices on his behalf. The Bhakti saints out rightly rejected the supremacy and hegemony of Brahmins in this regard. The saints regarded killing of living beings to please gods or for one's own pleasure as an unpardonable sin. No amount of charity could ever wash that off. It was a sheer mockery to think of meeting God while destroying His own creatures. Ravi Dass says:

When they cut off the head of a living creature,

O Ravi Dass,

The foolish ones call it a 'holy sacrifice'.

If they get their own heads chopped off,

How will they themselves feel?

(Upadhya 165)

(Ravidas Mundahe Kaat Kar/ Murakh Kahat Halaal

Gala Katvahu Aapna/ Tau ka Hoye Haal.)

In another verse he states:

Kill not any living beings, says Ravi Dass;

Living beings are truly one with God.

Even if thousands of holy cows are given in charity,

The sin of killing cannot be washed off.

(166)

(Praani Badh Nhi Kijiye/ Jivah Brahm Smaan

Ravidas Paap Nhi Chhutehe/ Crore Gauan Kar Daan.)

Ravi Dass regarded it a great folly to kill and eat living creatures in the name of religion. The killer and eater of meat could never go to heaven, even if he offered holy prayers day and night and performed meritorious actions of the highest type. Such a person would have to come back on this earth to settle down his account with those creatures whose flesh he had chopped off and eaten. Ravi Dass also forbade taking wine and other intoxicants. According to him, there was only one intoxicant which he strongly prescribed, and that was the elixir of *Nam* itself. A single draught of this drink brought about unsurpassed ecstasy and kept one eternally intoxicated. He says:

Why should you drink wine, O Ravi Dass?

Its intoxication wears off soon.

Drink the ambrosia of Nam;

Once intoxicated with it,

You remain intoxicated forever.

(168)

(Ravidas Madura Ka Pijiye/ Jo Chadae Chadae Utraye

Naam Maharas Pijiye/ Jo Chadae Nahi Utraye.)

In another couplet, Ravi Dass says that rituals are performed to acquire spiritual knowledge, to experience union with God. Once that experience happens, rituals are given up as no more required.

For fruit blossoms the vegetation.

When the fruit comes, the blossom decay.

For knowledge do we practice rituals.

When knowledge comes, rituals decay.

(Raga Bhairo, Sagar 77)

(Phal Karan Phooli Banrai/ Phal Laga Tab Phool Bilai

*Gianae Karan Karam Abhiyas/ Gian Bhaya The Karmeh
Naas.)*

This indicates a healthy, experimental attitude towards rituals, religious actions, techniques and paths.

One form of worship which he adopted and valued highly was to be in the company of saints or *sadhus* and listen to their discourses. He loved the company of saints who moved about in the country imparting non-formal cultural education to the people. He valued them so much that he sought their protection from the onslaught of the problems of living in search of God. He believed that one could attain the highest spiritual immaculate state in their company. He says:

If you seek the protection of a saint,

Your sins, though millions, will be erased.

(Raga Basant, Sagar 79)

(Sadhu Ki Jo Lehi Ot/ Tere Miteh Paap Sab Kot Kot.)

Looking for the company of saints amounted to creating an appropriate environment that would influence and determine the right form of worship for him to experience the ultimate reality instead of merely following inherited forms of worship in a spiritually indifferent environment. Ravi Dass continued to give some more examples of empty rituals that did not seem to alter state of consciousness. He was highly critical of the rituals that did not uplift the mind. He writes:

He may bathe at sixty eight pilgrimages,

Worship twelve holy stones,

Donate a well, or a tank,

But if he slanders all goes waste.

.....

If he does rituals on eclipse at *Kurukshetra*,

Offers a woman along with ornaments,

Hears with his ears all the scriptures,

Yet he slanders, he will earn no merit.

(Raga Gaund 11, Sagar 69)

(Je Oho Athsath Teerath Nahve/ Je Oho Dvadas Sila Pujave.

Je Oho Koop Tta Devavae/ Kare Nind Sab BIRTHA Jaave.

.....

Je Oho Grahn Kare Kulkhet/Arpe Naar Seegar Samet.

Sagli Simriti Svarni Sunae/ Karae Nind Kavnae Nhi Gunae.)

The vicious imposition of the caste system and socio-religious practices of ostracizing the untouchables wobbled the huge segment of the society in the times of Ravi Dass. The harsh and the uncompromising social customs based on caste

restrictions segregated the untouchables from the mainstream. The position of the *Shudra* in the society was considered as the lowest and their highest duty was to serve the Brahmins who were learned and virtuous. According to the traditional views, the *Shudra* was considered to be born for the assistance to the Brahmins. Being born in the low caste, the study of the *Vedas* and Holy Scriptures were not allowed to them. Listening and reciting the Vedic mantras by the *Shudras* was considered a profane act and they were highly punished for it. Moreover, the ideals and standard of morality were raised to such an extent that the condition of the *Shudra* worsened. The greatest expedition of Guru Ravi Dass was to put an end to the tradition of caste system as it was constructed on the basis of partiality, inequity. According to Guru Ravi Dass, everyone was equal in the eyes of God:

All earthen pots are made up of the same clay;

The same creator has created them all.

The same One pervades all beings, O Ravi Dass;

The same potter has made them all.

(Upadhya 176)

(Ekae Maati Ke Sab Bhandhe/ Sab Ka Eko Sirjanhara

*Ravidas Biyape Eko Ghat Bheetar/ Sab ko Ekae Gharre
Kumhara.)*

In another verse, he says:

From the same drop of ocean,

This entire expansion has taken place.

It is only the foolish ones, O Ravi Dass,

Who bring in the consideration of high and low caste.

(176)

(Ravidas Ek Hi Boond So/ Sab Hi Bhayo Vitthar

The two religious dogmas of *karma* and *dharma* were responsible for the establishment of caste doctrines. The ideology of *karma* professed that the actions performed in the previous birth decided the present caste position. Consequently, it was an honour to take birth in the high caste and the birth in the low caste was penalizing. This also suggested the superiority of the high caste people over the modest background section of the society as far as intelligence, potential and ethics were concerned. In order to institutionalize caste and establish the concept of *karma* and *dharma*, the priestly class authored a large number of *Smritis* or *dharmashastras*. These *dharmashastras* were claimed to be based on the *Vedas*. Like *Vedas*, they were also infallible, inviolable and beyond the realm of any questioning and reasoning. *Manusmriti* is the best known of all such *dharmashastras* which was hailed by the priestly class as the most important work after the *Vedas*. Caste, according to Manu, was the creation of God, and the Brahmins, who were at the pinnacle of caste hierarchy, were the living embodiments of gods on earth. By studying the so called sacerdotal literature and situating these texts in socio-historical perspective, it becomes quite evident that these texts were written with the primary purpose of establishing and maintaining the Brahmanical hegemony. The *slokas* and the *suktis* in the texts appeared lovely and lofty only for the Brahmins and the upper castes. In the Brahmanical religion and literature; there was absolutely no place for broader social utility or individual justice and freedom which were the heart and soul of any true religion.

Ravi Dass refused to believe in such ideology or recognize the superiority of the Brahmins and rejected the notion that being born in the superior caste was a result of the good actions of the previous life. He endorsed a full equality between the Brahmins and the *Shudras* and became a champion of the downtrodden. He tried to awaken the people about the duplicity and the hypocrisy of the priests exploiting people's religious sentiments to serve their own ends. His attitude to caste discrimination may be judged as vehement denunciation of the system. The mediators of God whom Ravi Dass called deceivers had devised low and high castes and divided men in to high caste Brahmins and low caste *Shudras*. Ravi Dass through his poetic protest provided the *Shudras* and the downtrodden people a comprehensive and all inclusive trial to attain spiritual redemption. He questioned the apprehensions of the

conformists and dictators of the Hindu religion and helped in paving the way for the impoverished, downtrodden and underprivileged to raise their voice and give a form to their yearnings. He emphasized that salvation could be attained by true love and devotion to God and did not require scholastic learning. His poetry regulated an undeviating trend of social dissent amid set the low caste people. It gave them confidence and firmness to articulate against the age old discrimination and despotism they had been facing.

Ravi Dass endeavoured to transform the socio-cultural life by giving an alternative ideology of social equality against the Brahmanical orthodoxy. His discontent against the contemporary society, divided into high and low, was clearly discernible in his writing. He protested against the authority of the four pillars of the contemporary society. He illuminated the period he lived in and made assiduous efforts to teach and enhance the level of the masses through his preaching and built a respectable place for the downtrodden in the socio-religious and economic spheres of society of his times. Through his teachings, Ravi Dass gave shudders to the strict class stratification and proclaimed that God loved his creation disregarding birth, caste or creed.

Ravi Dass was critical of the higher castes, Brahmins, *Kshatriyas* and *Vaishyas*, the twice born, who sought to keep themselves pure by avoiding contact or touch with the low caste. He was obviously rejecting the idea of being an untouchable by taking birth in the low caste. Merely taking birth in the family of high castes did not make anybody pure because their hearts were not pure. He states:

Though *Ganga* water be made in to liquor,

Saintly people don't drink it.

Though impure liquor or some other water

Be mixed with *Ganga*, it remains not different.

(Raga Malaar 1, Sagar 81)

(*Sursari Salal Krit Barni Re/ Sant Jan Karat Nahi Pann.*

Sura Apavitar Nat Avar Jal Re/ Sursari Milat Nahi Hoyal Ann.)

What Ravi Dass mentioned in this context was that when a high caste Brahmin does an impure action, he becomes impure and ceases to be a Brahmin. But when a low caste leather worker does noble and divine actions, he becomes divine and no longer remains of the low caste. Just as a Brahmin loses his caste through low actions, a *Shudra* also loses his caste through his high actions. It is the quality of heart and feelings, the motives and intentions which determine one's high or low status and not the caste by birth. He says:

Giving up the consideration of caste by birth,

Determine caste by action.

This, indeed, is a prescription of the Vedas,

Says, Ravi Dass, on reflection.

(Upadhyaya 177)

(Janam Jaat Ku Chhad Kar/ Karni Jaat Pardhaan

Eho Bed Ko Dharam Ha/ Kare ravidas Bkhaan.)

Similarly a person of low caste and status when engaged in higher level of aspiration and achievement deserves respect rather than contempt on the basis of his origin. He makes fun of the Brahmins who came to him to find the way to God:

Listen, people of the town!

My caste is well known as leather craftsmen.

God, His attributes, I keep in heart.

(Raga Malaar 1, Sagar 79)

(Nagar Jana, Mari Jaat Bikhiat Chammar

Hirday Naam Gobind Guna Saar.

My caste removes dead cattle

Around Benaras every day.

Skins them and beats the skin.

Now chief scholars prostrate to him,

Ravi Dass the servant has taken refuge in His Name.

(81)

*(Meri Jaat Kut Bandhala Dhor Dhavanta/ Nit Benarasi Aas
Pasa*

*Aub Brip Pardhan Tihi Kareh Dandyot/ Tere Naam Sarnaya
Ravi Dass Dasa.)*

Ravi Dass preached that all men were children of one God and had originated from same five elements. All dissimilarities that men had created for themselves were false. Ravi Dass believed that one's caste should be decided not by birth but by one's worth. According to him, the conventional distinction of religions was a superficial division of humanity created by priests of different religions. He regarded all the outer distinctions of caste, creed and religion as hollow and worthless. He gave an example to illustrate this elevation in the following verse. He says:

A wall of water, a column of air

A mixture of blood and semen,

A structure of bones and flesh and veins

And the poor bird lives in it.

(Raga Sorath VI, Sagar 51)

(Jal Ki Bhit, Pawan Ka Khamba/ rakat Boond Ka Gara.

Haad Maas Narri Ko Pinjar/ Pankhi Base Bichara.)

Ravi Dass condemned the caste system based on birth and provided a way out of its tyranny. He advocated caste or social divisions based on worth, motive and actions, which made it dynamic, not static. He was conscious about his low caste status in the society and this discrimination made it possible for him to identify with every menial worker and scavenger. He marshalled against everyone who mistreated

downtrodden segments of the society with aversion and contempt. He was of the opinion that all the social divisions based on notions of purity, culture or money ceased to exist for a person devoted to God. He says:

A family in which a saint of God is born
Is known in the world
Nor as of high or low caste,
Not as beggarly or kingly,
But as pure fragrance.

(Raga Bilawal 1, Sagar 65)

(Jeh Kul Sadhu Baisno Hoye

Baran Abaran Rank Nhi Iswer/ Bimal Baas Janiye Jag Soye.)

The saint-poets, who came from society's underclass, in many ways clothed their rebellion against injustice and oppression in obedience to God.

Their devotion was to a God who 'stirred up rebellion' in the hearts of the devotees. The God exhorted and inspired his devotees to free him from the idolatrous-and ignominious- fetters of pseudo-religion founded and jealously guarded by the unscrupulous pundits and *maulvis*. In this concord, the deity and the devoted were determined to rescue religion and society from the clutches of corrupt elements.
(Mani 138)

Ravi Dass strived for a true religion which was not an end in itself but a means to bolster humanist values and ethos for a better social order. In his total obedience and devotion to God, Ravi Dass found no difference between him and the Almighty. He says:

Between You and me, me and You,
What's the difference?
As between gold and its jewel

Water and its wave. (Raga Sri, Sagar 23)

(Tohi Mohi Mohi Tohi Antar Kaisa

Kanak Katik Jal tarang Jaisa.)

In another verse, he says:

You are the sandal wood.

I am a poor castor-oil plant.

live in your company.

A lowly tree has grown tall.

Fragrance is housed in foul smell.

(Raga Asa 111, Sagar 35)

(Tum Chandan Hum Irand Bapure/ Sang Tumahre Basa

Neech Rukh Te Ooch Bhaye Ha/ Gandh Sugandh Nivasa.)

The Bhakti saints, through their *bani*, widened the scope and dimensions of the social protest. They were not merely iconoclasts. They had more enduring commitment to society. Whatever they did was prompted by a vision, the vision of new egalitarian society based on common humanism. The feelings, dreams and aspirations of the unknown, secluded and marginalized people found expression through their poetry. As Gail Omvedt remarks:

The Bhakti radical, Ravi Dass was the first to formulate an Indian version of utopia in his song ‘Begumpura’. Begumpura, ‘the city without sorrow’, is a casteless, classless society; a modern society, one without a mention of temples; an urban society as contrasted with Gandhi’s village utopia of *Ram Rajya*. ‘Begumpura’ described a land with no taxes, toil or harassment, where there is no hierarchy but all are equal. Finally, calling himself a ‘tanner now set free’, he proclaims that he wanders freely within his friends: the right to walk anywhere in a settlement city or village, is a unique matter for dalits. (7)

The antithetical conditions prevailing in the society gave birth to Utopia. The probability of a progressive society, a society full of equity and love aroused hopefulness and fervid sentiments among the people. Ravi Dass' *Begumpura* was strikingly contrasted with the golden age of Brahmanism. Brahmanism did not have any such offer of equity and ideal society for anyone. They talked about an age or an era when *Varnashramadharma* was truly practiced; sacrifices took place at mass level and pure men, the Brahmins, united with gods. Salvation was considered accessible only outside this world of *Maya* or illusion. Ravi Dass in his verse referred to building a palace on a dung heap and he very well knew where the dung heap existed. It was the need of the hour to clear the moral and religious debris. He was targeting not only the Hindu observances but also objecting to the ethical paragons established by Hindu Brahmins.

Gail Omvedt defined utopia:

Utopias are projected visions, sometimes imagined in the past, sometimes located in a different world, and sometimes inscribed in the future possibility. But they all lay a claim to some kind of reality, the reality of being possible, and in so doing provide the motivation for efforts at social transformation. The 'heavenly city' or the glorious life projected in the religious tradition is brought down to earth, and posed as inspiration for living and possible action before oppressed human being. (15)

The unique *Begumpura* concept was the vision of Guru Ravi Dass. In this unique vision of Queen City, there is a deliberation of all those awful appalling and detestable forces which Ravi Dass had to bear because of his low birth. He imagines *Begumpura* as:

The regal realm with the sorrowless name:

They call it Queen City, a place with no pain,

No taxes or cares, none opens property there,

No wrongdoing, worry, terror, or torture.

Oh my brother, I've come to take it as my own,

my distant home, where everything is right.
That imperial kingdom is rich and secure,
Where none are third or second-all are one;
Its food and drink are famous, and those who live there,
dwell in satisfaction and in wealth.
They do this or that, they walk where they wish,
They stroll through fabled palaces unchallenged.
Oh, says Ravi Dass, a tanner now set free,
Those who walk beside me are my friends.

(Hawley and Juergensmeyer 32)

*(Begumpura Shehar Ka Nao/ Dukh Andoh Nahi Tehi Thao
Na Tasvees Khiraj Na Maal/ Khauf Na Khata Na Taras Jwaal
Ab Mohi Khoob Vatan Raah Payi/ Oohan Khia Sada Mere
Bhai.
Kayam Dayam Sada Patshahi/ Dom Na Sem Ek So Ahi
Abaadan Sada Mashoor/ Oohan Gani Baseh Mamoor
Tio Tio Sail Kareh Jio Bhaave/ Marham Mail Ko Na Atkaave
Khe Ravidass Khlaas Chamara/ Jo Hum Sehri So Meet
Hamara.)*

Begumpura, the imagined city of Ravi Dass, is in many ways a modern city. There is no property, no taxes, no political torture, no temple and no king in Ravi Dass' utopian city. The city without sorrow is full of prosperity and equality and everyone can walk where they wish. This indicates that the rich and the privileged castes cannot impose restrictions of place upon the subordinated castes and the poor. It is a land of the poor and the deprived, an image of society they aimed for. There is a

remarkable distinction between the land of the Brahmins and rulers and *Begumpura*, the land of the saints. The Brahmanical land was characterized by *Vedas*, caste- based distinctions, religious sects, old age, death, pain and doubts. The Sorrowless land of Sant Ravi Dass contained no such evils. Ravi Dass posited presence of several good features in his Sorrowless Town. What is present is security, brotherhood, one Supreme Power without check and balances of a second or third power, population, riches, contentment, and friendliness. God is the eternal emperor of this kingdom and *Sants* are his courtiers.

Ravi Dass' mention about the tax showed his worries about the taxes he had to pay as a non-Muslim. Ravi Dass was the lowest of the low in the caste hierarchy. His caste carried away dead bodies of the cattle from the town, so he could not have had much of property. So, being a poor non-Muslim, he worried about paying taxes. Apart from *Jaziyah* on all Hindus as tax for protection of non- Muslim life in Muslim State, there was tax on Hindus for going on pilgrimage to their shrines. This explains why Ravi Dass admired absence of restraint on movement in his ideal state. The tax on commercial transactions of Hindus was double of the tax on commercial transactions of Muslims, which Ravi Dass might have paid during his life time. In any case, tax seemed to have caused him enough of anxiety to wish for an ideal society where people like him did not have to pay taxes.

Ravi Dass had characterized his Sorrowless Town as absence of all worries and cares, of fear and fall, of loss and change. Normally many of these cares, worries and fears emerge from deep attachments. Therefore, Ravi Dass, experiencing poverty and social contempt, because of his caste and family, might have grown to be routinely detached from his unhappy environment. Low birth combined with high aspiration to be one with the highest God seemed to have made him impervious to the nibbling away of worries and anxieties. That was why he felt settled in state of mind which had become his home and country. This kingdom once established was never lost, as it was always the same without change. Ravi Dass said that having found his true home, he was free of his feelings of being a low leather worker. He had been freed of his Dalit consciousness, and so he was free of feeling of limitations and dependence.

The *Sants* regarded God as inexpressible, aniconic and unmanifest. They generally preferred to worship non anthropomorphic God. While the *Saguna bhaktas* considered and worshipped God in the anthropomorphic manifestation of the divine. The *Sants* were called *Nirguni* in contrast to those who worshipped God with attributes and in the form of *avatars*. McLeod characterizes the *Sants*' view of God by saying:

The Sants were monotheists, but the God whom they addressed and with whom they sought union was in no sense to be understood in anthropomorphic terms. His manifestation was by His immanence in His creation and, in particular, by his indwelling within the human soul. (McLeod 152)

Ravi Dass has been an acclaimed singer-poet of *Nirguna* bhakti and eminent personality in northern bhakti tradition who venerated the amorphous God with great esteem. The medieval period did not allow unmediated approach to the gods and goddesses of the upper class people. In such social surroundings, Ravi Dass opted to worship God without attributes and defied the Brahmin class by stating that God was accessible without the interference of negotiators.

Ravi Dass upheld the path of *Nirguna* devotion as supreme for attaining salvation and freedom from taking birth again and again. He says:

Many times have I taken birth and died;

I shall not again fall into this whirlpool.

My boat is weak, but the Lord in the form of Guru

is my boatman.

Taking the name from Him,

I shall soon go across the ocean of existence.

(Upadhya 160)

(*Anik Baar Janme Aur Mariye/ Foon Ha Bhamar Na Par Ha*

Patar Naav Khevatiya Gur Rama/ Naam Let Hi Tar Ha.)

Time and again in his poetry Ravi Dass validated devotion as the sole determinant of one's true worth and as the most efficacious means of obtaining ultimate liberation. He totally rejected the power and status accruing by virtue of one's position at birth in the Hindu caste.

As a *Nirgun* poet, Ravi Dass vehemently condemned idolatry. He did not even approve of *Aarti* as it involved the worship of an idol. He preached that God had no attributes and was manifested everywhere, and was to be apprehended only by inner (mystical) experience.

Neither the Lord of *Lakshmi* nor the Lord
Of *Kailas* nor anyone else is equal to
Those who repeat God's name.

(Singh, Darshan 73)

(*Har Japat Teu Jana/ Padam Kavlas Patitass*

Sam Tul Nahi Aan Kou.)

The first and the most basic aspect of the nature of God which is emphatically and repeatedly maintained in Ravi Dass' verses is His oneness of God. Duplicity or trinity in God has no room in the poetry of Ravi Dass.

No second or third in Him

He ruleth alone. (72)

(*Dom Na Sem Ek So Aahi.*)

The *brahmanical* triad, the belief in the three gods of creation, sustenance and destruction, had not found acceptance with Ravi Dass. These Gods, as it is clear from the above verse, were not even equal to the Saint's immersion in the devotion of the Supreme God. With the rejection of the polytheistic idea of God, the doctrine of *avatara* (descent or manifestation of God in human form) was also disregarded by Ravi Dass. Though the traditional names associated with various *avatars* of Vishnu are retained, denoting the idea of One Supreme God. The traditional ritualistic form of *bhakti*, which was popular with the *avatars*, has been replaced by *nama-bhakti* (loving

adoration and continuous remembrance of God by contemplating on His attributes). His idea of God may be called monotheistic, but monotheism here is not the same as found in the Semitic religions, where the main emphasis was on the transcendence of God. Ravi Dass rejected the concept of *avatarvada* and denied recognition to Rama as a human form. He carried the concept of religious liberation even further and abandoned both Hinduism and Islam, in favour of the pure essential Rama – that light of divine love in the heart. Ravi Dass had used the following traditional names of God: *Rama, Raja Rama, Ramchandra, Raghunatha, Hari, Madhva, Murari, Gobinda, Niranjana* etc. Though the names used by him are same as with the *Saguna Sants* or *Vaishnava bhaktas* but they had been given a new meaning. “All of these are epithets of the *avatar* Ram rather than Ram as absolute God. This in no sense implies that Ravi Dass is acknowledging the doctrine of incarnation of God as *avatars*, which is specifically rejected by him.” (Callewaert 83-84)

God was remembered by different names. Names might appear different but the intention of the devotee was to identify the Same God to express his love towards Him or extend prayers to Him. The name of Rama had been used for his *Nirguna* form and his *avatar* i.e. *Saguna* form. As Callewaert remarks:

Ram is the most frequently used name of God in the *vani* of Ravi Dass. In the medieval period the name Ram was used for both God in his incarnated form and His attributeless nirgun form. Ram was an important name of God in the works of Kabir and Vaudeville says that in the works of Kabir “*rama* or *nama* is conceived as the supreme bija-mantra, containing all truth or being *satya* in itself. (86)

Nama is also of great importance for Ravi Dass. As Callewaert observes, “At a conventional level, ‘name’ refers to the particular letters or sounds, the label by which something is known. Secondly at a metaphysical level, for Ravi Dass ‘Name’ refers to the concept of the essential essence of God. Moreover, the names of God are not to be confused with the concept of the Name of God.” (85) Ravi Dass clearly remarks:

I worship Him, who has no village,

No place and no name. (85)

(*Kahe Ravidass Main Ta Hi Koon pooju*)

Ja Ke Gaun Thaun Nhi Koi.)

For Ravi Dass, “Ram is the name of God par excellence and whilst he uses a wide range of names for God but it is the name Ram which for him is the supreme name of God. When Ravi Dass refers to ‘Ram’ he is not referring to Ram, the *avatar* of Vishnu but to the supreme God... It is through Ram, in his *nirgun* form, that the knot of doubt which separates the soul from God can be overcome. The ultimate goal for Ravi Dass is the total absorption into Ram.” (86) He emphasized on the repeating the name of God:

Repeating the name of God in every breath gives joy.

Remembering Him, His servants are saved

And so are the sinners.

(Raga Asa V, Sagar 39)

(Har Har, Har Har, Har Har Hare

Har Simrat, Jan Gaye, Nistar Tare.)

Ravi Dass gives example of Sant Kabir who was enlightened by reciting the name of God. Repeating God’s name, remembering His Presence always and everywhere, made him wise and enabled him to see the meaning and purpose of life. The God’s name helped him to face the trials and tribulations of life. This God might have been a concrete idol of Lord Rama, or it might have been an abstract God that pervaded the whole universe, in whose memory Lord Rama himself was named in the first place, though later the two got identified with each other. But this distinction did not matter to Ravi Dass as remembering His name serves the ultimate purpose of life i.e. attaining salvation.

According to him, ethical actions and benedictions from intimate absolutist God can help achieve salvation from the cycle of rebirth. These blessings can be obtained by chanting the Name of God or worshipping God with ardent devotion. Ravi Dass said that one could see God not only in the temple, but could also feel Him inside one’s heart. He firmly asserted that the tradition of idol-worship, pilgrimage, sacrifices, rituals and even existence of gods and goddesses were superfluous. All the

chanting of the *mantras*, *japas*, and meditation were not for the welfare of the society. He advised the people not to believe in idol worship or in fasting etc. because he wanted to protect the people from the clutches of priesthood and Brahmanism as well. He wanted to make the people have direct contact and relation with God through *bhakti* and therefore there was no need of the intermediary priestly class.

Guru Ravi Dass clearly states that true devotion consists only of devotion to *Nama*. Whatever is done without the name of God is illusion. *Bhakti* does not consist in giving charity, displaying learning or retiring to the caves in the forests. He is totally against performing rituals, singing sweet songs in praise of God, controlling senses to practice ascetic exercises or observing fasts. He denounced the idea of reciting the mantras and counting and telling the beads of rosary, washing of feet or shaving the head. Describing what devotion is and what it requires, Ravi Dass says:

This is how devotion is done, O friend!

Whatever one does without God's Name-

All that is called delusion.

When the ego is gone,

Then alone can devotion come;

Such indeed, O friend, is the true nature of devotion.

(Upadhya 55)

(Aaisi Bhagti Suno Re Bhai

Ram Nam Bin Jo Kuchh Kariye/ So Sabh Bharam Khayi

Aapo Gayo Tab Bhagti Payi/ Aaisi Bhagti Bhai.)

It is vitally important to remember that no one can realize God without the grace and guidance of the guru. In Ravi Dass, guru played the most important role in the spiritual development of the worshipper. Ravi Dass regarded *guru* as essential for the realization of God. It was only through *guru* that an individual could have communion with God. Guru Ravi Dass gave a lot of emphasis on the importance of guru but revolted against the idea of hero-worship i.e making an idol of the guru. It

must be clearly understood that guru is essentially a ‘teacher’ and not an incarnation of God – to be obeyed but not to be worshipped. It was totally different from the old Hindu concept.

According to Ravi Dass, the sole purpose of observing purifying disciplines and seeking the company of saints was to obtain the gift of *Nama* or the guru *mantra* from a true living guru, develop love and devotion for God and finally attain divine union. Callewaert is of the opinion, “The guru is thus of paramount importance to Ravi Dass. He believes that the experience of meeting the guru is greater than *jap*, chanting, or *tap*, austerities. It is essential to have the guru as guide in order to obtain liberation. Only the guru can give the philosopher’s stone, which is the experience of union with God.” (Callewaert 94-95) According to Ravi Dass, seeking refuge with God was a precondition of the path of loving devotion. One must therefore try one’s best to surrender oneself to the guru and become united with God through him.

Ravi Dass believed that the human form was a rare gift granted by the Lord, a fruit of the meritorious deeds of the innumerable lives. According to him, the precious gift of life was bestowed on us for the sole purpose of God’s realization. He said that if one dedicated one’s life to the guru and God and led a truthful life, the basic purpose of being born as human being would be fulfilled. On the other hand, if one spent life in pursuit of the lowly sensual pleasures of the world, this invaluable human life would be wasted. Ravi Dass says:

In vain does your precious life pass;

You never repeat God’s Name

Until your body is about to decay.

Wealth, wife, son, father and mother-

They keep you company only for a short while.

(Upadhyaya 67)

(Ooche Mandir Sal Rasoi/ Ek ghari Phun Rahan Na Hoi

*Eh Tan Aisa Jaise Ghas Ki Tati/ Jal Gaiyo Ghas Ral Gaiyo
Mati*

Bhai Bandh Kutumb Sahera/ Oh Bhai Lage Kadh Savera
Ghar Ki Naar Urah Tan Lagi/ Uh Tou Bhoot Bhoot Kar Bhagi
Keh Ravidass Sahae Jag Lootiya/ Hum To Ek Ram Kahi
Chhootiya.)

Poetry of Ravi Dass injected didacticism in the individual highlighting the ephemeral nature of human earthly existence. According to him, human beings, panting with temporary and peripheral allurements of the materialistic world, unmindful of the sheer transitory and unpredictable nature of their lives were ignorant of the difficulties and hardships of the real life. Sant Ravi Dass conveyed through his verses that the body of human beings was perishable and his fellowmen were wasting their valuable time in running after the ephemeral pleasures of the world. He says:

It is just a clay puppet, but how it can dance!
It looks here, looks there, listens and talks,
Races off this way and that;
It comes on something and it swells with pride,
But if fortune fades it starts to cry.

(Hawley and Juergensmeyer 28)

(Mati Ka Putra Kaise Nachat Ha/ Dekhae Dekhae Sune Bole,
Dariyo Firat Ha.
Jab Kachhu Paave Tab Garav Karat Ha/ Maya Gayi Tab
Rovan Lagat Ha.)

Ravi Dass reflected on the idea of transitory life. He said that human beings felt proud of their lofty mansions and gorgeous dining halls but they were unmindful of the fact that no one could stay a moment more when death prevailed. In this way, the whole world would be lost to death and decay just as it was lost in attachments to people and things, lost in transient pleasures, without the right knowledge of what was real. Ravi Dass here felt contented and happy that he was not lost as he had been

repeating the name of God. He had established Him in his heart and thereby acquired detachment from his family members and friends.

Brother, says Ravi Dass, the world is a game, a magic show

And I'm in love with the gamester,

The magician who makes it go.

(28)

(Keh Ravidass Baji Jag Bhai/ Bajigar So Mohi preet Bani Ayi.)

Ravi Dass confessed that he had reached the final stage of his spiritual evolution by forsaking all worldly attachments. All that he did was to worship the name of Rama. This means that he repeated the name of God, called Rama, constantly in his mind and, thereby, disengaging it from the body and the society that the body created, and all this had resulted in a state of mind where he had lost all fear of death, as he was no longer identified with his body.

Ravi Dass firmly rejected the idea of searching God in the forests, mountains, shrines, pilgrimages, temples and mosques. He warned people of the futile search because all outer searches for God and all outer forms of religious observances would lead us nowhere. God resided within in the temple of the body, but people foolishly and feverishly ran around seeking Him outside. He says:

Why are you searching outside?

The Creator is within you.

The musk is within the deer,

Yet it searches for it in the grass.

(Upadhya 84)

(Khojat Kithu Firay/ Tere Ghat Main Sirjanhar

Kasturi Mrig Pass Hai Re/ Dhudat Ghas Firay.)

A boundless love and devotion to God was the pervasive theme of Ravi Dass' poetry.

It also forms the basis for his egalitarian social philosophy, according to which all who practice selfless devotion are rendered equal thereby, no matter their caste affiliation or other status. In his poetry, Brahmins, who are usually portrayed as lacking such devotion, are caricatured as hollow figures pumped up with false pride and hypocrisy; the endless rituals they perform are disparaged as empty in comparison with the power and salvific potentialities inherent in loving devotion. (Schaller 107)

The language of Sant Ravi Dass was conversational and transparent. Unlike ornate literature which emphasized suggested meaning, he spoke the language which brought the said and the meant closer. He believed in the direct communication of experience. He was a great votary of the mother-tongue and revolted against Sanskrit and opened the gateway to knowledge by releasing it from Sanskrit which had by that time become the language of the priests and *Pundits* only. With poetry written in the language of the ordinary people, Ravi Dass came up with a hope for a greater society which would fight against the victimization, cheating and unfair treatment at the hands of the hegemony of the power holders who were befooling the innocent people in the name of religion.

Ravi Dass used simple and straight forward language in his verses. His poetry was not only in the vernacular, it was also in the colloquial language of the masses, full of *Prakrit* forms rather than Sanskritized speech of the upper classes. It was also marked with imagery drawn from their work. He became famous among the working class people who had trouble connecting with Sanskrit, the language of the Hindu scriptures. Thus, he defiantly walked into the territory that was reserved by the priest class for itself. His poetry not only mirrored the social life of his times, but was also an expression of life as actually lived by the people. His poetry, written in the language of the common people, provided the clues to the solution of various social and spiritual problems. The poet became the guide and philosopher of the community. He brought religion closer to the people and advocated a disciplined social and

domestic life in which prayer was a part of the daily life and could be performed at home.

The voice of Guru Ravi Dass not only stands against the existing voice of the ruling systems, but also becomes the mirror of society by being the language of the common people. His language has become a voice that carries people's aspirations and sufferings. Being the voice of the low class, the voice of Ravi Dass turns out to be a voice of courage. The ordinary and unornamented language and style make the poetry of Guru Ravi Dass a literature of public sphere where it also addresses the other existing forces. His voice is a voice of confrontation against the Brahmanic logic and therefore his poetry becomes a literature of affirmation of the self and a new consciousness.

Therefore, the religious contribution of Ravi Dass lies in resuscitating and revitalizing the spirituality that lay buried in the external ceremonial and formal observances lacking inner emotional appeal. He waged a persistent campaign in opposition to the evils of the contemporary society. First of all, he resisted the discriminatory social structure (i.e. caste, untouchability, low status of *Shudras* and their deprivation of knowledge). He persuaded the impoverished and subjugated section of the society to evade incomprehension and ignorance and worked hard to elevate their status because destitution, ignorance and incomprehension are adversaries of humanity. Secondly, he gave a tough resistance to the intellectual hegemony of the Sanskrit language and as a mark of protest he created parallel regional literature. He criticized the religious imposition and various externalities like priesthood, rituals, pilgrimages to the holy places and idol worship. Through his notion of one God, he questioned the established religion and hegemonic structures and denounced all the artificial barriers which were created in the name of religion. On the ruins of those age-old formal religions, Sant Ravi Dass evolved a new spirituality, primarily based on *bhakti*. Ravi Dass denounced all religious rites and practices as useless and thus had no value for spiritual progress. On the contrary, he declared that the purity of heart was the most important element for worshipping God and thus for achieving salvation. He showed the ignorant people the right path to worship God through meditation and repeating the name of God and he severely resisted the conservative sections of the upper caste strata. Ravi Dass through his Holy verses preached the altruistic philosophy before modern social reformers Karl

Marx or Gramsci came on the scene. Guru Ravi Dass, through the example of his own personal life, showed the inner spirit of religion. He rejected and disregarded all those elements that tended to veil the inner spirit of religion and hinder its application in the practical life. He helped in evicting the pneuma of worship from the perceptible ritualistic crust and erroneous exercises and revived the eternal inner spirituality, acceptable to all genuine religious people. In this way, he helped in reinstating and reconciling the disunited divine soul to the religious life of the human beings. He makes a great appeal even today for a number of reasons. He began with an inkling of scorn for being born in low caste and edged up possessing paranormal abilities in his hands. His poverty was laughed at, and then he had kings and queens as his disciples. He was socially untouchable, and then learned priests bowed to him ceremoniously. He was slandered by organizers of religion, and then they carried him in a palanquin on their shoulders.

The approach of Guru Ravi Dass was realistic and practical. He endeavoured to change the opinion and prospect of the Indian people towards the so called low castes and disgraced professions. He surrendered to God with his utmost devotion and powerful emotions that also included cogent proposition. His emotions and reasoning were rationally structured. Guru Ravi Dass has become a source of inspiration and aspiration for generations to come. He did not reject or deny the past that had made him what he was, but accepted it and nourished the best in it with his own individual efforts.

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CONCLUSION

Hinduism represents a culture of religio-theological traditions native to the soil of India. The *Vedas* are often equated with the Bible and the Quran and considered to be the pillar on which Hinduism rests. Besides the *Vedas*, the Hindus have a large body of sacred books, venerated and considered to be authoritative in varying degrees – the *Itihasas*, the *Puranas* and the *Smritis*. It is true that the vast majority have regarded the four *Vedas* to be divinely inspired and authoritative. Though they are songs sung by many seers, eminent scholars like Sankaracharya, Ramanuja and Madhvacharya have viewed the whole of Vedic thought and tradition as one work, and sought to establish that there is complete harmony and consistency in them and the message conveyed is one. But their own understanding of the *Vedas* has not been the same and their followers have formed different sects. There are also the teachings of saint- poets who flourished in different regions of India at different times, and are considered sacred by their respective followers.

Before Muslims invaded India, the Hindu society was divided into four different castes. There were major cultural differences between North Indian and South Indian societies. Despite these differences, unity in diversity was the hallmark of Indian society. But a sea change occurred in the situation with the invasion of Muslim power in India. As regards Hindu converts to Islam, their economic conditions or their life style hardly improved after the conversion. In social status too, the gulf separating them from the immigrants and their descendants was no less wide than that which prevailed between them and the upper Hindu castes prior to conversion. In this background, their political importance was negligible, much lower than that of Hindus. The Brahmanic Hindu mind tended to blame the prolonged Muslim domination of medieval India for all that was wrong with the Hindu society, ignoring the fact that Muslim rule itself was established due to treacherous conspiracies of many Hindu rulers and made worse by the social disunity and distrust between castes. Probably, the people oppressed by the caste-feudalism, especially the lower classes, had welcomed the Muslim invaders as deliverers and emancipators.

Closing the doors in the face of the enemy and holding the community together through compulsive and regulatory measures could only be a part of the solution. What was most needed at this time was strengthening of the sense of

attachment towards ancestral religion, traditional culture and way of life. The role and importance of the Bhakti Saints lie in their accomplishing this with greater or lesser success. The beginning of Bhakti movement and advent of Islam and the Sufis in nation were concurrent in northern and north-western regions of India. But the Bhakti movement was already there with a hoary tradition as an active force when Islam appeared on the scene. It did not originate primarily in response to the Islamic challenge as is often made out. However, it could be said that the challenge evoked religious fervour and renewed activity among the Hindus to an unprecedented extent. Just as Sufis rebelled against orthodoxy in Islam, the Hindu saints revolted against the Brahmin orthodoxy. Both Sufis and Saints actually became the confluence for Hinduism and Islam and it led to a conglomeration of spiritual values, thoughts, and ways of worshipping. Further, the concepts to which Islam attached the highest importance came to be central to the teachings of the radical wing of the Bhakti Saints. It is this class that was respectful towards Islam and gave clear expression to syncretic sentiments. With all this, their teachings emanated from the Hindu religious tradition and bore no alien touch – they were very much Hindu. The Bhakti Saints commanded general respect, and their teachings came to be on everybody's lips from generation to generation. The stream of orthodox tradition itself became purer because of them.

The Bhakti Movement as a whole generated realisation in the people and ingrained a feeling of devotion to their own culture and religion. They were able to reach the common people and win their hearts. Before the movement could gather momentum, large scale conversions had already taken place. The success of the movement lay in halting the wave of deflections and saving society from incurring further damage. Though not consciously proselytizing with a view to gain converts the Bhakti Saints were able to attract many Muslims, and this created an environment favourable to the return of caste groups marginally converted and inadequately Islamized back to Hinduism.

Bhakti movement was diffused with the spirit of dissent and protest and the Bhakti Saints wielded devotionism as a cultural weapon against caste. In fact, devotionism was an offshoot of the transformatory zeal which was the heart of the movement. The common people found in religious idioms a means of working towards a just, humane and egalitarian order. This does not mean that their resistance

was confined to the religious sphere only. In fact, their resistance extended not only to the religious, social, political and economic spheres but also to the cultural ideas and institutions. The Bhakti Saints helped the maligned lower caste people to create a positive self-image by rejecting the inferior status to which they were relegated by the Brahmanical tradition. They recognized and appreciated the worth of the people who worked with their hands and laboured hard to remove poverty, misery, ignorance and sorrow to lead a virtuous life. This was in direct contrast to the parasitism of the priestly class who shunned work and believed that all the ills in the society could be cured by chanting the magical mantras.

Bani of Sant Kabir and Guru Ravi Dass helped in the development of new voices in the form of new religions, cultures and languages that cast a shadow on the authoritarian and hegemonic forces of the times. The religious and philosophical variety of the Vedic and other traditions like Buddhists, Jainism, Shaivism, Vaishnavism, Yoga or Advaita, can be viewed as different units of dialogic and argumentative tradition of Indian heterodox beliefs. In this Indian dialogic context, the poetry of these two poets as a social discourse has not only continued the argumentative tradition of India, but also retained a central significance in shaping the medieval history of India. In fact, the *bani* of Sant Kabir and Guru Ravi Dass can be seen as one of the participating links in the chain of socio-cultural communication. The voice of these saints can be assessed as one of the representative links in this widening and deepening social diversity.

The holy city of Kashi where Kabir and Ravi Dass lived was a hot-bed of the pundits and the Brahmins; theological debates and idol worship was rampant. The untouchables and the low caste men like Kabir and Ravi Dass, were greatly shunned and barred from all spiritual knowledge. In the brilliant light of these Bhakti Saints, however, anyone or anything that darkened the face of Truth, through charlatanism, cleverness, dogma or habit, stood exposed. The poetic utterance of these two saints made all efforts to make people aware of social reality and false practices prevalent in the society. As the social atrocities and religious misguidance had fastened its roots deep and had been accelerating considerably, the religious and social revolution had become the need which materialized in the teachings of these saints. The poetry or the *bani* afforded space to the marginal voices to project their consciousness. Through their *bani* or the poetic utterance, the saints unfolded wisdom and enlightened the

ordinary people who were trapped in the darkness of rituals, idolatry, social hierarchy, superstitions and polytheism.

A notion of opposition and disagreement evolved against the contemporary practices ingrained in the Hindu sectarian discourses which had taken their shape from the authoritative pre-existing and coexisting Hindu discourses. To spread this wave of reform, a voice was needed and hence saint poetry came as a new voice or as a new accent of distinct and religious ideology. The saint-poets dissipated the monopoly of the *Pundits* and *Maulvis* by educating the masses to denounce superstitions and blind faith, prevalent in both Hinduism and Islam. They made laudable efforts to emancipate the society from the clutches of the arbitrary social distinctions by advocating the oneness of all creatures and convert the class-ridden society into class-less society. Humiliated and oppressed at the hands of the upper class, especially the Brahmins, these saint-poets incorporated in their poetry symbols and metaphors derived from their low profession not only to shatter the myths of the *Pundits*, not only to ventilate their natural vengeance against them, but also to register with the masses a conviction that devotion and salvation are possible even without the mediation of the *Pundits* and *Purohits*.

Saint Poetry was not meant for the contemporary generations only, but is also oriented to the past and to the future. Their poetry has become a reformatory and enlightening step which attempts to displace the discourses based on ritualism and formalism. The poetry of these saints is not a work of mere literary imagination. It retains a distinct social identity by having a distinct belief-system in the simple language of everybody – *Santbhasha*. The ordinary and unornamented language and style make the voice of these saint-poets a literature of public sphere where it addresses the voice of other existing voices. This voice is a voice of the confrontation against the Brahmanic logic and their writing becomes a literature of affirmation of the self and a new consciousness. The common language and style not only put the voice of saints in to a direct dialogue with the ruling belief system but it also dialogues with the common people who had the same pangs and dilemma. Turning their back upon the priests and kings or their minions the saint-poets addressed themselves to the task of voicing the innermost stirrings of the people. Poetry no more remained an object of formalistic exercise or scholastic hair-splitting. It got inter-related to the task of worship and promoting social awareness. In other words, it got

elevated to the holiness of the scriptures assuming, thereby, the authority to reflect and interpret the total reality of man. The canonization of *Adi Granth* as the holy book of Sikhism is a great example. In this process, the poetry also challenged the supremacy of the hoary texts bequeathed by the tradition. The Saint Poetry was, above all, a spiritual enrichment, moral enlightenment, intellectual illumination and mental solace for the people whose sufferings and struggles, joys and sorrows made it possible.

The ideology of the saint-poets was the ideology of the new society where the status of the low-born was not inferior to that of so called high-born. Kabir dreamt of a class-less society where everybody was equal in the eyes of God and Ravi Dass imagined his own version of it and named it '*Begumpura* (Land Without Sorrow). The very concept of this utopia aroused a great hope in the hearts of the marginalised and oppressed lower caste people. Through this concept, these saint-poets instilled in them a sense of self-confidence and human identity and tried to create a place where they could wander freely – something the marginalized could never do in actual Benaras. With these cities in their dreams, the saint-poets laid the foundation of socialism in the fifteenth century. They have found a place, a system which may not be achievable in near future but everything is just and fair in that land. Thus, Kabir and Ravi Dass thought ahead of their times and their imagined and dreamed cities are vision of the future promised lands from the egalitarian point of view. This is also revolutionary in the context of these poets who were weaver and *chamar* by profession. It is also evident from the fact that they were not only poets but also sociologists. The idea of *Begumpura* is not found in any other saint of the Bhakti movement.

The medieval Brahmanical religious literature contained detailed treatment of large number of rituals and ceremonies (*Samskaras, yajnas, Vratas*), customary observances of sacred and festive days (*Tithis, Utsavas*), and the practices of visiting holy places (*Tirthas*) and bathing (*Snana*) in holy places. The practice of *Varna-dharma* or so called caste duties and observance of the above noted rituals and kindred items seemed to have become disproportionately important or popular in a large section of Indian society owing to nominal allegiance to the Vedic-Brahmanic tradition during the late medieval centuries. This fact is proved by the repeated, often very strongly worded criticism of these rituals and observances offered by medieval saints like Kabir and Ravi Dass. They taught *bhakti* as the highest form of *dharmā*

and brushed aside the traditional practices and rituals, which may have constituted the *dharma* of millions of Brahmanical followers of medieval India.

These saint-poets of medieval Indian Bhakti renaissance stressed undivided loving devotion to one all powerful God. Their concept of *dharma* was theistically oriented. This fact deeply influenced their attitude to traditional Brahmanical norms and forms of religious life. They feely criticized and ridiculed the *Puranic* form of religion. Sacrificial rituals, temple rituals, cult of purificatory baths at holy places and rivers, observance of rules and customs of class, caste, and stage, and numerous ceremonies connected with birth, death, agriculture, and propitiation of gods and goddesses, all these aspects of Brahmanical and popular religions were given a tough resistance by one stroke of devotional fervour. Consequently, the myth of the after-world allurements and the tyranny of the invisible destiny in the garb of religion were shattered and a social awakening was generated against all social exploitation and oppression.

The quest for God in Saint Poetry was really the quest for a new God who was not only kind and compassionate but also uplifter of the low and dissolver of the mark of one's caste. The new God for Sant Kabir and Guru Ravi Dass was both alleviator of pain and suffering and destroyer of distinction based on birth and caste. By projecting kings, officials and the priests acting in ways violative of the laws of God, these saint-poets showed them up as essentially human and not divine in their origin or character. This is what makes them rare poets because they belong as much to our times as they did to their own. They are not just medieval poets who were non conformists and radical in their ideas in the fifteenth century, but are also a vibrant presence in modern times and are there with young generation in all their struggles against social discrimination, religious intolerance and human suffering in general. The poets are unique because of their power of expression, flexibility and assimilative and communicative qualities. Their lively and vibrant voice when adapted to music could move large crowds, reached wide areas and transcended time. Being full of exuberant emotions, their poetry became an effective means of worship. The bhakti poets along with their poetic protest expressed the raptures of the released soul. The rapport established by these Saint Poets through their brilliant communicative skills enhanced the appeal of their message in the form of resistance in the religious idiom.

Sant Kabir and Guru Ravi Dass were revolutionary poets of medieval times who thought ahead of their times, raised a voice against the hegemonic institutions and orthodox values of their times. They fought for the downtrodden, deprived and the marginalized sections of the society and gave them an identity of their own. Their approach was humanistic and spread a feeling of universal brotherhood by breaking boundaries and spaces literally and metaphorically. The resistance which these poets offered in their poetry is still relevant in the present times in the form of social reform movements. Today there is an increasing social awareness on the part of the members of backward and downtrodden castes. Many of them continue to use Saints as symbols and inspiration for their struggle. In the medieval period, the Saints fought oppression using the weapons of poetry, meditation and life of devotion. Although the form of struggle may have changed but their resistance still continues in one or the other way.

These poets were really futurists and visionary as they gave the concept of one God and protested against the hierarchical institutions when nobody even thought about resistance. They discussed the themes of democracy, equality, opposition to priestly power and ritualism in their *bani* and laid emphasis on the experience. They brought a new message to the people across the subcontinent. They denounced the rituals and restrictions of Brahmanism, proclaimed the equal dignity of all castes, and sang of love of God seen not as a distant deity but as a familiar loving father. They brought the theme of ecstasy for all the people. Their poetry was in the colloquial language of the masses, full of *Prakrit* forms rather than the Sanskritized speech of the upper classes. It was marked with the imagery drawn from their work, from the life of production – weaving, spinning, dyeing, tanning hides and making shoes etc. They were the poets of the people. The true religion which they taught was humanity, not Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, or Buddhism.

After having passed through the test of times, whatever remains becomes the ethos of an age. Sant Kabir and Guru Ravi Dass are credited with building up the ethos when forces of conflict were highly active. Thus, despite the distance in time Sant Kabir and Guru Ravi Dass are not obsolete. They keep pace with history. At the level of thought and expression, the unorthodox attitude of these saint-poets highlighted issues that are relevant even today. Mutual tolerance, respect and accommodation of others are the essential requirements for any pluralistic society to

survive. Even global survival depends on the harmony among diverse elements. But the hegemonic forces of negation have always been active in the form of domination and exploitation and, thus, the world has been structured according to the design based on their interests. It is here that Sant Kabir and Guru Ravi Dass appear as rebellious, irreverent and often blasphemous according to the standards set by dominant classes. The relevance of these saint- poets can be seen in the fact that during the time of general political and social upheaval their verses and sayings have the capability to provide inner strength to the people to challenge the system in any age.

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GLOSSARY AND NOTES

<i>Aarti</i>	:	A form of Hindu prayer in which incense bearing sticks, flowers are offered to the idol of a divine accompanied with moving of a tray containing burning of oil lamps in circles and ringing of bells and singing of hymns
<i>Acharyas</i>	:	The spiritual teacher or guide
<i>AdvaitaVedanta</i>	:	A School in Hinduism in which people believe that their soul is not different from Brahman
<i>Ahimsa</i>	:	Non-violence
<i>Allah</i>	:	The Muslim name of God
<i>Alwars</i>	:	The saint- poets devoted to Lord Vishnu
<i>Avatarvada</i>	:	The concept of reincarnation
<i>Bani</i>	:	Language or speech
<i>Bhagvad Gita</i>	:	<i>The Gita</i> : the song of the Lord that depicts the celebrated dialogue between Arjuna and Krishna during the <i>Mahabhartar</i> War.
<i>Bhakti</i>	:	A sentiment of single minded devotion and condition of the whole being of a devotee whose mind and body are totally absorbed in the object of his worship and remain continually directed towards it.
<i>Brahma Sutra</i>	:	A rule or thesis in Sanskrit grammar or Hindu Law or Philosophy
<i>Chamar</i>	:	A member of a low Indian caste whose caste occupation is leather-work.
<i>Chandala</i>	:	A person from the outcaste section of society
<i>Dharma</i>	:	Religion, a way of life
<i>Dvaitadvaita Vedanta</i>	:	The school of philosophy which states that humans are both different and non- different from God i.e. Brahman

and individual soul. This philosophy is also known as *Bhedabheda*.

<i>Gyan</i>	:	Knowledge
<i>Hath yoga</i>	:	A technique used by the yogis for attaining liberation through physical postures and breathing exercises combined with meditation and austerities.
<i>Havana</i>	:	A fire ritual where the blend of different herbal roots, leaves, grains, butter, milk, incense and seeds are offered to the holy fire.
<i>Japa</i>	:	Chantings
<i>Jaziyah</i>	:	A tax paid by non-Muslims subjects of a Muslim ruler
<i>Julaha</i>	:	A weaver (considered a low caste in Hindu Varna system.)
<i>Karma</i>	:	Action
<i>Kshatriya</i>	:	The second of the four Hindu castes after Brahmins
<i>Mantra</i>	:	A word or formula chanted or sung as an incantation or prayer.
<i>Maya</i>	:	Illusion
<i>Mayavada</i>	:	A doctrine which teaches that everything is illusion
<i>Mleccha</i>	:	A term commonly used among the Brahmins of the past for people belonging to the lower caste, particularly, the invading Muslims.
<i>Moksha</i>	:	Salvation
<i>Mukti</i>	:	Complete emancipation from the material world. The word also means <i>nirvana</i> or <i>moksha</i> (salvation).
<i>Mullah</i>	:	A Muslim Priest
<i>Nath-Pantha</i>	:	One of the medieval movements in India with combined ideas taken from Buddhism, Shaivism and <i>Yoga</i> traditions. The Naths regard Shiva as their Lord.

<i>Nayanars</i>	:	The saint-poets devoted to Shiva
<i>Nirguna</i>	:	The school of Bhakti which advocates God as unmanifest, formless, attributeless and as an experience that is beyond the limits of human expression.
<i>Parampara</i>	:	Guru's lineage or tradition
<i>Prakrit</i>	:	One of the ancient or medieval vernacular dialects of northern and central India that existed alongside or were derived from Sanskrit.
<i>Pujari</i>	:	A Hindu temple priest. He performs the temple rituals including <i>Puja</i> and <i>Aarti</i> .
<i>Puranas</i>	:	A kind of encyclopedia giving information about Hindu religious forms and their countless traditions, various Hindu gods and goddesses, Hindu myths and legends, origin of the universe, Indian system of time measurement, astronomy and a number of other fields of practical utility.
<i>Puranic</i>	:	Belonging to the <i>Puranas</i>
<i>Rama</i>	:	The name of the seventh <i>avatara</i> of Vishnu, King of Ayodhya, the hero of the epic Ramayana. In Bhakti Literature, Rama is often used more as a synonym for God than as a specific reference to the hero of Ramayana
<i>Sadhna</i>	:	Meditative method to attain spiritual goal
<i>Sadhu</i>	:	A Hindu ascetic.
<i>Saguna</i>	:	The concept which perceives God as having physical form or attributes. The <i>Saguna</i> manifestations of God being the familiar deities of Hindu mythology, especially the chief incarnations of Vishnu, Ram, and Krishna.
<i>Samskaras</i>	:	Permanent mental impressions, recollections or psychological imprints formed by repeated witnessing or

doing of things.

<i>Sandhya-bhasha</i>	:	The twilight language
<i>Sant Mat</i>	:	The point of view of saints
<i>Satguru</i>	:	True (sat) spiritual teacher (guru)
<i>Satguru</i>	:	The true Guru
<i>Shaikh</i>	:	The head of a tribe or family, or a leader in a Muslim community
<i>Shaktas</i>	:	The worshippers or the followers of Goddess Shakti
<i>Shaligram</i>	:	The most revered and sacred stone worshipped by the devotees of Vishnu.
<i>Shastra</i>	:	A word in Sanskrit which literally means rules, manual or a book of specialized knowledge in a particular area.
<i>Shavism</i>	:	A sub-sect of Hinduism comprising worshippers and followers of Lord Shiva
<i>Shivalinga</i>	:	An abstract or aniconic representation of the Hindu deity Shiva in Shaivism.
<i>Shradha</i>	:	An offering made to the manes of any deceased person, on an appointed day after his or her death
<i>Shudra</i>	:	The lower most of the four Hindu castes comprising of lowly professions like weaving and shoe-making.
<i>Suddhadvaita</i>	:	It is “purely non-dual” philosophy, a Hindu <i>Vaishnava</i> tradition focused on the worship of Krishna. It believes that salvation can be achieved by the grace of God through bhakti and devotion.
<i>Sufi</i>	:	A Muslim ascetic or mystic
<i>Sukti</i>	:	A wise saying
<i>Tapa</i>	:	Austerities
<i>Tilak</i>	:	A mark or symbol worn on the forehead by Brahmins or upper caste Hindus as an indication of status

<i>Ulatbansi</i>	:	A particular category of Kabir's poems written in an "upside-down language". The technique expresses the ideas that otherwise would be difficult to explain and articulate. Kabir's <i>ualtbansi</i> poems are a part of a long tradition in India.
<i>Upanishadas</i>	:	The concluding portions of the <i>Vedas</i>
<i>Vedas</i>	:	The ancient sacred books of the Hindus written in Sanskrit. It is believed that knowledge is revealed in the four early Hindu Scriptures (Rigveda, Samveda, Yajurveda, Athurveda).
<i>Vaishnavism</i>	:	A sub-sect of Hinduism comprising of worshippers of Lord Vishnu
<i>Vaishya</i>	:	The third of the four Hindu castes comprising of traders and farmers
<i>Varnashramadharm</i>	:	Sanskrit term for Hindu caste system
<i>Vedanta</i>	:	The summarized form of teachings of the <i>Vedas</i>
<i>Vedic</i>	:	Pertaining to the <i>Vedas</i>
<i>Vibhuti</i>	:	<i>Sacred</i> ash applied on the forehead and / or other parts of the body.
<i>Vishishtadvaita</i>	:	One of the most popular schools of the Vedanta School of Hindu Philosophy. According to this philosophy, Brahman exists alone but is characterized by multiplicity. It is a school which believes in all diversity subsuming to an underlying unity.
<i>Vithoba</i>	:	Vitthal, another name for the Hindu deity Krishna (an incarnation of Vishnu)

CONCLUSION

Hinduism represents a culture of religio-theological traditions native to the soil of India. The *Vedas* are often equated with the Bible and the Quran and considered to be the pillar on which Hinduism rests. Besides the *Vedas*, the Hindus have a large body of sacred books, venerated and considered to be authoritative in varying degrees – the *Itihasas*, the *Puranas* and the *Smritis*. It is true that the vast majority have regarded the four *Vedas* to be divinely inspired and authoritative. Though they are songs sung by many seers, eminent scholars like Sankaracharya, Ramanuja and Madhvacharya have viewed the whole of Vedic thought and tradition as one work, and sought to establish that there is complete harmony and consistency in them and the message conveyed is one. But their own understanding of the *Vedas* has not been the same and their followers have formed different sects. There are also the teachings of saint- poets who flourished in different regions of India at different times, and are considered sacred by their respective followers.

Before Muslims invaded India, the Hindu society was divided into four different castes. There were major cultural differences between North Indian and South Indian societies. Despite these differences, unity in diversity was the hallmark of Indian society. But a sea change occurred in the situation with the invasion of Muslim power in India. As regards Hindu converts to Islam, their economic conditions or their life style hardly improved after the conversion. In social status too, the gulf separating them from the immigrants and their descendants was no less wide than that which prevailed between them and the upper Hindu castes prior to conversion. In this background, their political importance was negligible, much lower than that of Hindus. The Brahmanic Hindu mind tended to blame the prolonged Muslim domination of medieval India for all that was wrong with the Hindu society, ignoring the fact that Muslim rule itself was established due to treacherous conspiracies of many Hindu rulers and made worse by the social disunity and distrust between castes. Probably, the people oppressed by the caste-feudalism, especially the lower classes, had welcomed the Muslim invaders as deliverers and emancipators.

Closing the doors in the face of the enemy and holding the community together through compulsive and regulatory measures could only be a part of the solution. What was most needed at this time was strengthening of the sense of

attachment towards ancestral religion, traditional culture and way of life. The role and importance of the Bhakti Saints lie in their accomplishing this with greater or lesser success. The beginning of Bhakti movement and advent of Islam and the Sufis in nation were concurrent in northern and north-western regions of India. But the Bhakti movement was already there with a hoary tradition as an active force when Islam appeared on the scene. It did not originate primarily in response to the Islamic challenge as is often made out. However, it could be said that the challenge evoked religious fervour and renewed activity among the Hindus to an unprecedented extent. Just as Sufis rebelled against orthodoxy in Islam, the Hindu saints revolted against the Brahmin orthodoxy. Both Sufis and Saints actually became the confluence for Hinduism and Islam and it led to a conglomeration of spiritual values, thoughts, and ways of worshipping. Further, the concepts to which Islam attached the highest importance came to be central to the teachings of the radical wing of the Bhakti Saints. It is this class that was respectful towards Islam and gave clear expression to syncretic sentiments. With all this, their teachings emanated from the Hindu religious tradition and bore no alien touch – they were very much Hindu. The Bhakti Saints commanded general respect, and their teachings came to be on everybody's lips from generation to generation. The stream of orthodox tradition itself became purer because of them.

The Bhakti Movement as a whole generated realisation in the people and ingrained a feeling of devotion to their own culture and religion. They were able to reach the common people and win their hearts. Before the movement could gather momentum, large scale conversions had already taken place. The success of the movement lay in halting the wave of deflections and saving society from incurring further damage. Though not consciously proselytizing with a view to gain converts the Bhakti Saints were able to attract many Muslims, and this created an environment favourable to the return of caste groups marginally converted and inadequately Islamized back to Hinduism.

Bhakti movement was diffused with the spirit of dissent and protest and the Bhakti Saints wielded devotionism as a cultural weapon against caste. In fact, devotionism was an offshoot of the transformatory zeal which was the heart of the movement. The common people found in religious idioms a means of working towards a just, humane and egalitarian order. This does not mean that their resistance

was confined to the religious sphere only. In fact, their resistance extended not only to the religious, social, political and economic spheres but also to the cultural ideas and institutions. The Bhakti Saints helped the maligned lower caste people to create a positive self-image by rejecting the inferior status to which they were relegated by the Brahmanical tradition. They recognized and appreciated the worth of the people who worked with their hands and laboured hard to remove poverty, misery, ignorance and sorrow to lead a virtuous life. This was in direct contrast to the parasitism of the priestly class who shunned work and believed that all the ills in the society could be cured by chanting the magical mantras.

Bani of Sant Kabir and Guru Ravi Dass helped in the development of new voices in the form of new religions, cultures and languages that cast a shadow on the authoritarian and hegemonic forces of the times. The religious and philosophical variety of the Vedic and other traditions like Buddhists, Jainism, Shaivism, Vaishnavism, Yoga or Advaita, can be viewed as different units of dialogic and argumentative tradition of Indian heterodox beliefs. In this Indian dialogic context, the poetry of these two poets as a social discourse has not only continued the argumentative tradition of India, but also retained a central significance in shaping the medieval history of India. In fact, the *bani* of Sant Kabir and Guru Ravi Dass can be seen as one of the participating links in the chain of socio-cultural communication. The voice of these saints can be assessed as one of the representative links in this widening and deepening social diversity.

The holy city of Kashi where Kabir and Ravi Dass lived was a hot-bed of the pundits and the Brahmins; theological debates and idol worship was rampant. The untouchables and the low caste men like Kabir and Ravi Dass, were greatly shunned and barred from all spiritual knowledge. In the brilliant light of these Bhakti Saints, however, anyone or anything that darkened the face of Truth, through charlatanism, cleverness, dogma or habit, stood exposed. The poetic utterance of these two saints made all efforts to make people aware of social reality and false practices prevalent in the society. As the social atrocities and religious misguidance had fastened its roots deep and had been accelerating considerably, the religious and social revolution had become the need which materialized in the teachings of these saints. The poetry or the *bani* afforded space to the marginal voices to project their consciousness. Through their *bani* or the poetic utterance, the saints unfolded wisdom and enlightened the

ordinary people who were trapped in the darkness of rituals, idolatry, social hierarchy, superstitions and polytheism.

A notion of opposition and disagreement evolved against the contemporary practices ingrained in the Hindu sectarian discourses which had taken their shape from the authoritative pre-existing and coexisting Hindu discourses. To spread this wave of reform, a voice was needed and hence saint poetry came as a new voice or as a new accent of distinct and religious ideology. The saint-poets dissipated the monopoly of the *Pundits* and *Maulvis* by educating the masses to denounce superstitions and blind faith, prevalent in both Hinduism and Islam. They made laudable efforts to emancipate the society from the clutches of the arbitrary social distinctions by advocating the oneness of all creatures and convert the class-ridden society into class-less society. Humiliated and oppressed at the hands of the upper class, especially the Brahmins, these saint-poets incorporated in their poetry symbols and metaphors derived from their low profession not only to shatter the myths of the *Pundits*, not only to ventilate their natural vengeance against them, but also to register with the masses a conviction that devotion and salvation are possible even without the mediation of the *Pundits* and *Purohits*.

Saint Poetry was not meant for the contemporary generations only, but is also oriented to the past and to the future. Their poetry has become a reformatory and enlightening step which attempts to displace the discourses based on ritualism and formalism. The poetry of these saints is not a work of mere literary imagination. It retains a distinct social identity by having a distinct belief-system in the simple language of everybody – *Santbhasha*. The ordinary and unornamented language and style make the voice of these saint-poets a literature of public sphere where it addresses the voice of other existing voices. This voice is a voice of the confrontation against the Brahmanic logic and their writing becomes a literature of affirmation of the self and a new consciousness. The common language and style not only put the voice of saints in to a direct dialogue with the ruling belief system but it also dialogues with the common people who had the same pangs and dilemma. Turning their back upon the priests and kings or their minions the saint-poets addressed themselves to the task of voicing the innermost stirrings of the people. Poetry no more remained an object of formalistic exercise or scholastic hair-splitting. It got inter-related to the task of worship and promoting social awareness. In other words, it got

elevated to the holiness of the scriptures assuming, thereby, the authority to reflect and interpret the total reality of man. The canonization of *Adi Granth* as the holy book of Sikhism is a great example. In this process, the poetry also challenged the supremacy of the hoary texts bequeathed by the tradition. The Saint Poetry was, above all, a spiritual enrichment, moral enlightenment, intellectual illumination and mental solace for the people whose sufferings and struggles, joys and sorrows made it possible.

The ideology of the saint-poets was the ideology of the new society where the status of the low-born was not inferior to that of so called high-born. Kabir dreamt of a class-less society where everybody was equal in the eyes of God and Ravi Dass imagined his own version of it and named it '*Begumpura* (Land Without Sorrow). The very concept of this utopia aroused a great hope in the hearts of the marginalised and oppressed lower caste people. Through this concept, these saint-poets instilled in them a sense of self-confidence and human identity and tried to create a place where they could wander freely – something the marginalized could never do in actual Benaras. With these cities in their dreams, the saint-poets laid the foundation of socialism in the fifteenth century. They have found a place, a system which may not be achievable in near future but everything is just and fair in that land. Thus, Kabir and Ravi Dass thought ahead of their times and their imagined and dreamed cities are vision of the future promised lands from the egalitarian point of view. This is also revolutionary in the context of these poets who were weaver and *chamar* by profession. It is also evident from the fact that they were not only poets but also sociologists. The idea of *Begumpura* is not found in any other saint of the Bhakti movement.

The medieval Brahmanical religious literature contained detailed treatment of large number of rituals and ceremonies (*Samskaras, yajnas, Vratas*), customary observances of sacred and festive days (*Tithis, Utsavas*), and the practices of visiting holy places (*Tirthas*) and bathing (*Snana*) in holy places. The practice of *Varna-dharma* or so called caste duties and observance of the above noted rituals and kindred items seemed to have become disproportionately important or popular in a large section of Indian society owing to nominal allegiance to the Vedic-Brahmanic tradition during the late medieval centuries. This fact is proved by the repeated, often very strongly worded criticism of these rituals and observances offered by medieval saints like Kabir and Ravi Dass. They taught *bhakti* as the highest form of *dharmā*

and brushed aside the traditional practices and rituals, which may have constituted the *dharma* of millions of Brahmanical followers of medieval India.

These saint-poets of medieval Indian Bhakti renaissance stressed undivided loving devotion to one all powerful God. Their concept of *dharma* was theistically oriented. This fact deeply influenced their attitude to traditional Brahmanical norms and forms of religious life. They feely criticized and ridiculed the *Puranic* form of religion. Sacrificial rituals, temple rituals, cult of purificatory baths at holy places and rivers, observance of rules and customs of class, caste, and stage, and numerous ceremonies connected with birth, death, agriculture, and propitiation of gods and goddesses, all these aspects of Brahmanical and popular religions were given a tough resistance by one stroke of devotional fervour. Consequently, the myth of the after-world allurements and the tyranny of the invisible destiny in the garb of religion were shattered and a social awakening was generated against all social exploitation and oppression.

The quest for God in Saint Poetry was really the quest for a new God who was not only kind and compassionate but also uplifter of the low and dissolver of the mark of one's caste. The new God for Sant Kabir and Guru Ravi Dass was both alleviator of pain and suffering and destroyer of distinction based on birth and caste. By projecting kings, officials and the priests acting in ways violative of the laws of God, these saint-poets showed them up as essentially human and not divine in their origin or character. This is what makes them rare poets because they belong as much to our times as they did to their own. They are not just medieval poets who were non conformists and radical in their ideas in the fifteenth century, but are also a vibrant presence in modern times and are there with young generation in all their struggles against social discrimination, religious intolerance and human suffering in general. The poets are unique because of their power of expression, flexibility and assimilative and communicative qualities. Their lively and vibrant voice when adapted to music could move large crowds, reached wide areas and transcended time. Being full of exuberant emotions, their poetry became an effective means of worship. The bhakti poets along with their poetic protest expressed the raptures of the released soul. The rapport established by these Saint Poets through their brilliant communicative skills enhanced the appeal of their message in the form of resistance in the religious idiom.

Sant Kabir and Guru Ravi Dass were revolutionary poets of medieval times who thought ahead of their times, raised a voice against the hegemonic institutions and orthodox values of their times. They fought for the downtrodden, deprived and the marginalized sections of the society and gave them an identity of their own. Their approach was humanistic and spread a feeling of universal brotherhood by breaking boundaries and spaces literally and metaphorically. The resistance which these poets offered in their poetry is still relevant in the present times in the form of social reform movements. Today there is an increasing social awareness on the part of the members of backward and downtrodden castes. Many of them continue to use Saints as symbols and inspiration for their struggle. In the medieval period, the Saints fought oppression using the weapons of poetry, meditation and life of devotion. Although the form of struggle may have changed but their resistance still continues in one or the other way.

These poets were really futurists and visionary as they gave the concept of one God and protested against the hierarchical institutions when nobody even thought about resistance. They discussed the themes of democracy, equality, opposition to priestly power and ritualism in their *bani* and laid emphasis on the experience. They brought a new message to the people across the subcontinent. They denounced the rituals and restrictions of Brahmanism, proclaimed the equal dignity of all castes, and sang of love of God seen not as a distant deity but as a familiar loving father. They brought the theme of ecstasy for all the people. Their poetry was in the colloquial language of the masses, full of *Prakrit* forms rather than the Sanskritized speech of the upper classes. It was marked with the imagery drawn from their work, from the life of production – weaving, spinning, dyeing, tanning hides and making shoes etc. They were the poets of the people. The true religion which they taught was humanity, not Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, or Buddhism.

After having passed through the test of times, whatever remains becomes the ethos of an age. Sant Kabir and Guru Ravi Dass are credited with building up the ethos when forces of conflict were highly active. Thus, despite the distance in time Sant Kabir and Guru Ravi Dass are not obsolete. They keep pace with history. At the level of thought and expression, the unorthodox attitude of these saint-poets highlighted issues that are relevant even today. Mutual tolerance, respect and accommodation of others are the essential requirements for any pluralistic society to

survive. Even global survival depends on the harmony among diverse elements. But the hegemonic forces of negation have always been active in the form of domination and exploitation and, thus, the world has been structured according to the design based on their interests. It is here that Sant Kabir and Guru Ravi Dass appear as rebellious, irreverent and often blasphemous according to the standards set by dominant classes. The relevance of these saint- poets can be seen in the fact that during the time of general political and social upheaval their verses and sayings have the capability to provide inner strength to the people to challenge the system in any age.