

**BHAKTI AS RESISTANCE: A STUDY OF SELECT
ENGLISH TRANSLATIONS OF BHAKTI POETRY**

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This is to certify that the thesis entitled “**Bhakti as Resistance: A Study of Select English Translations of Bhakti Poetry**” is a bona fide record of studies and research carried out by Megha K Jayadas under my guidance and submitted for the award of the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English. To the best of my knowledge, this research work has not been previously formed the basis of award for any degree, diploma, fellowship or any other similar titles. Its critical evaluation represents the independent work on the part of the candidate.

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DECLARATION

I, hereby, declare that the thesis entitled “**Bhakti as Resistance: A Study of Select English Translations of Bhakti Poetry**” is an authentic record of my studies and research carried out under the guidance of Dr. Syam Sudhakar, Assistant Professor & Research Guide, Research Centre, Department of English, St. Thomas' College (Autonomous), Thrissur. I hereby certify that no part of this work has been submitted or published for the award of any other degree, diploma, title, fellowship or recognition.

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A NOTE ON DOCUMENTATION

I, hereby, would like to acknowledge that the documentation in the thesis is prepared in accordance with the style format suggested by *MLA Handbook* (9th Edition).

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Introduction

Bhakti movement is commonly considered as a medieval phenomenon. During the medieval ages, the scholastic theory of Bhakti received a detailed manifestation in the hands of great philosophers and thinkers. A large number of devotees practiced Bhakti and its doctrines in every many parts of India. The specific domain of Bhakti emerged through ancient Vedic hymns and was gradually formulated through several centuries in the medieval period and reached its climax by the end of Mughal era and beginning of British rule.

Bhakti is the passionate love for the divine. As a spiritual movement, Bhakti originated in the lands of Tamil Nadu after the prosperous Sangham era. Later, along with its literary nature, Bhakti movement spread to the North as well as to the East and the West of the entire country. It was a philosophical and theological movement and continued till seventeenth century aiming at-social reformation and its leaders used Bhakti as their tool of protest against social anarchism. These poets expressed their thoughts using vernacular languages similar to the common man. The immense popularity of those spiritual texts and the societal relevance of these verses, many scholars worked on the concept of Bhakti.

Devotion as a spiritual movement followed a clear path to ultimate salvation by creating a personal relationship of love and surrender to a specific deity. According to the religious saints, the particular form of religion could be easily practiced by any devotee irrespective of caste, creed or gender. These melodious hymns were entitled as beautiful love verses for the divine. The lyrics were composed with mystical love for the divine. These saint poets largely criticised the rites, rituals, customs and so on of the religious systems formulated by Brahminical monopoly. They highly criticised the caste hegemony of medieval Indian society. Many poets, especially from the northern suburbs

of the country themselves belonged to lower caste lineages. A significant characteristic of their lyrics was the use of vernacular languages that opposed the Sanskrit domain, the elite language of medieval days. Hence, their verses proved to be a strong tool of protest that provided good insight into the medieval experiences and how they resisted the caste hegemony, gender issues and other intolerance.

These reasons opened a wider scope for the research on the topics related to Bhakti. Therefore, the research entitled ‘Bhakti as Resistance: A Study of the Select English Translations of Bhakti Poetry’ focuses on the manifestation of the idea of resistance in English translations of Bhakti poetry.

The major objectives of the thesis constitute the analysis of how our early spiritual poets used the platform of literature during medieval period to represent the theme of resistance. It also looks into the Indian devotional poetry from twenty-first century. It focuses on the problematisation of issues during the past reformation movements. Also, to study how those poets were able to demystify Vedic knowledge and philosophies to the general public.

In this research, the primary poets selected are Andal (Tamil Vaishnavite), Akka Mahadevi (Kannada Veerasaivite), Lal Ded (Kashmiri Saivite) and Mirabai (Rajasthani Vaishnavite) – four female figures from four different periods, languages and geographical locations. Their verses contain the spirit of love along with the vibrance of devotion. Passionate love and complete surrender to the favourite deity constitute the base of their ultimate devotion.

Archana Venkatesan’s text, *The Secret Garland*, offers the new and entire translations of Andal’s poems *Tiruppavai* and *Nacchiyar Tirumozhi*. They are beautiful love lyrics composed by medieval Tamil poet Andal. These compositions by a female mystic are perfect expressions of her powerful experiences rendered with correct usage

of bold and vibrant sensuality. Lord Vishnu is her saviour as well as her mesmerizing, awesome and at times cruel lover. Andal's verses are always characterized by the richness of language where words are built polyvalent and most mundane experiences are filled with the vibrant spirit of her deity. They are the longing cries of a maiden girl in extreme love with Vishnu, a 'heartless lover'. These verses reflect a vibrant, intelligent and boldly sensuous woman. As the title suggests, the story of Andal is directly connected with garland and the texts contains garlands of words. Today, Andal is considered as a goddess in Tamil Nadu and the enduring relevance of her poetry still continues to get celebrated in South India in the form of rituals, music, dance and other visual arts.

The book *Sky – Clad* by Mukunda Rao describes about the life and verses of Akka Mahadevi/Mahadeviyakka, one among the foremost feminist and religious icons of medieval India. Her verses composed in twelfth century Karnataka mark a radical journey into the realm of Bhakti literature. She worked with the feminine body, not around it, but by occupying it walking naked, beyond all the binaries of material world breaking the conventions of male-female and God-devotee relationships. The book represents a radical new form of reading her life and lyrics as one where the body is seen not as the prison of the mind or soul, but as a powerful ground of wisdom, intelligence, creativity and enlightenment. Also, it is the narrative with the right amount of storytelling about the Bhakti movement in Karnataka. In the book, Rao traces the path of Akka Mahadevi from Udupadi to Kalyana and finally ending at Srisailam. The author has described a perspective of her life in comparison with the life of her contemporaries and explains her magnitude both as a devotee and as a feminist rebel. It is at Kalyana where her devotion is tested orally and physically that makes the narrative more compelling. The book provides insights into prevailing spiritual rituals, rites and

currents of Karnataka Bhakti sect (Veerasaivism) and the treatment of human sexual body and gender with her clear stand on both.

A. K. Ramanujan's *Speaking of Siva* is a selection of free verses of major Veerasaiva poets of Karnataka. The yogic and tantric symbols, riddles and enigmas subvert the language of ordinary experiences with references to day and night, dawn and dusk, family relations and sexual life that takes on new spiritual meanings in a mystical sphere. They questioned religious superstitions, idol worship, rites and rituals and so on. The poems of Akka Mahadevi seem very powerful in communicating how she defined freedom and autonomy of an individual soul from the bondage of family relations and human physical body.

I Lalla, The Poems of Lal Ded, the translations of 146 poems of fourteenth century Kashmiri saint Lal Ded/Lalleswari by Ranjit Hoskote strikes with bursts of light and wisdom. Being an ardent devotee of Lord Shiva, these poems are rich with emotions and are composed in a precise yet philosophical manner. They are sensuously evocative and filled with ecstatic devotion. They are glorious manifestos of illuminations. They are verses of enlightenment and epiphany. They shuttle between the vulnerability of doubtfulness and the certainty of insight attained through resiliency and reflection. They tend to reject the renouncer's austere mortification of the body. Her verses (*vakhs*) are evolved from a silent mystic wanderer, who is uncertain of herself and looks for an anchorage in a hostile landscape; as a quester who has found belonging beneath a sky that is continuous with her mind. Her verses bear specific imprint of a continuing process of cultural and linguistic changes in its form, vocabulary, themes and images. In this translation initially published in 2011, Hoskote offers a new and fresh approach to Lal Ded for the modern reader, one that is alive and vital with the back-support of authentic research, detailed introduction and extra notes. His association with these

lyrics are reflected in the detailed Introduction of his book that makes the reader fascinated about the verses.

Mirabai: Ecstatic Poems by Robert Bly and Jane Hirshfield is one among the best translations of the lyrics of Mirabai, fifteenth century North Indian mystic poetess and an ardent lover of Krishna. In this collection, the authors have created lively English versions of her verses using fresh imageries and energetic beautiful rhythms to make them easily comprehensible to the modern readers. Here, Mira comes to life through the impressive interpretation of the translators. They feel fresh even today as much as they felt when this amazing poetess had sung them melodiously by herself centuries ago. To celebrate her ardent love and devotion she chose singing and dancing in ecstasy. Rather than being just literal translations, Bly and Hirshfield go for their otherworldly love by binding up hymns that keep Mira's ardent devotion to her lord, Krishna, and the disregard she had towards her husband, family and other mortal relations.

Love and the Turning Seasons by Andrew Schelling is a wonderful selection of India's poetry of spiritual and passionate erotic longing filled with sensuous desires. It contains poems from almost 2500 years ago and has verses originally composed by well-known Bhakti poets such as Nammalvar, Kabirdas, Surdas, Andal, Akka Mahadevi, Bahinabai, Muktabai, Akho, Jayadeva, Vidyapati, Mirabai, Lal Ded, Tagore and so on. Their book also consists of works from Upanishads, ancient Sanskrit poetry and folk songs from various regional parts of India. These poets emerged from the downtrodden classes of the medieval society such as leather workers, servants, refuse collectors, orphans etc. As mentioned in the introductory note, they wished for a democratic society similar to that of American gospels and blues, Shaker songs or the grand vision of poetic genius like Walt Whitman. Hence, these poets were directly questioned for their habit of daring to speak about the spiritual and religious matters. Legends say that many of these

poets simply vanished or got absorbed into their favourite deity or disappeared by a flash or lightning. The other few composed miracle verses that stood the test of time. Schelling has included works of other translators in the same field to build a fine anthology of India's erotic and spiritual poetry for other generations. For more than a thousand years, India had excelled in the composition of devotional literature with great mystical insights. In a land where erotic images and sculptures get ornamented in the temple walls and gods are known and admired for their explosive sexuality, these verses are richly bound with eroticism and mysticism, both being inseparable.

The thesis focuses on the theme of resistance in Bhakti poetry. It is built upon the concept of human physical body and sexuality. The four female poets centred in the thesis had expressed their devotion towards their favourite deity in the mode of passionate love. Their erotic love and longing towards God marks them different from other contemporary Bhakti poets of the period. When the male poets focused on protesting against social dogmas like caste issues, the female poets tried to locate the freedom of their sexual body, individual soul and the feminine autonomy which were strongly denied in medieval days.

The first chapter of the thesis "On Devotee and Deity: An Introduction to Bhakti Literature" traces the vast history of Bhakti tradition, both as a social movement and as a specific branch of Indian devotional literature. It focuses on the development of Bhakti cult in Tamil Nadu from the beginning of medieval days till the end of Mughal era. It also discusses about the significance of using vernacular languages in devotional poems apart from the usage of elite Sanskrit language of Brahmins. The chapter explains Bhakti as a counter-cultural movement. It provides details about Saivism and Vaishnavism across the country. The chapter also mentions about major literary figures of the movement spanning from 6th century to 17th century and analyses the similarity

of Bhakti hymns with that of Indian folk traditions. The rebellious concept of Bhakti in narrating human relationships is discussed. The relation of Bhakti hymns with the teachings of Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism is described in detail. Also, the reading on D. D. Kosambi's article gives details about Bhakti tradition in connection with the ideologies of Marxism that relates Bhakti cult with the economic scenario of India.

The second chapter titled "Being Woman: Theoretical Speculations on Female Body in Medieval India" is exclusively about female body and its connection with society, culture and religion. It discusses how her physical body and the bodily experiences shape her literal creativity. The chapter also looks into how a woman exists in a specific social context and how she reacts to the societal events that are imposed upon her psyche, identity and freedom. The chapter discusses on the feminine body expressed in the cultural and spiritual scenario of the East and West from ancient days. It locates how religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity and such other religions viewed woman and her physical body in respect to the prevailing social, cultural and spiritual circumstances. The identity of a female was always questioned and her feminine body was a matter of contamination. Pregnancy and motherhood were the only grading measurements of a woman's dignity. It was her sexuality that made her an all-time wife and mother. But, here the same sexuality makes her a tool of agency, autonomy, freedom, strength and courage. The chapter puts forward the significance of human physical body and how Bhakti poets used their body as a tool of resistance against gender inequality in medieval India. The feminine body, its desires and nudity always stood as a threat to men and conventional systems. This section also discusses on the significance of women saints and how they enlarged their individual space and transcended their physical body. They tried to defeat the traditional religious beliefs about feminine body and announced it is never an obstruction to the society or inferior

to human psyche. In contrast, it is a clean abode of human intelligence, knowledge, emotions, creativity, and enlightenment.

The third chapter “Desiring Devotees: An Analysis of Early Bhakti Poets—Andal and Akka Mahadevi” is solely focused on the lyrical analysis of the verses of Andal and Akka Mahadevi, the earlier female saints who intensely yearned for the unification with Lord Vishnu and Lord Shiva respectively. The first half of the chapter is about the life, works and the lyrical analysis of Andal, the Tamil Alwar saint. Both her works, *Tiruppavai* and *Nacciyar Tirumozhi*, are thoroughly analysed, especially from the aspect of feminine body and desires. In this section, the theme of Bridal Mysticism (*Madhurya Bhava*) in Andal is defined with lyrical examples. The importance of undertaking vow and maintaining physical cleanliness is explained as according to Andal, her physical body was a strong means of protest that lead her towards eternal transcendence. Her manifestation of sensual love and desire for her beloved lover was a matter of severe shock to the moralists and medieval masculinity. Akka Mahadevi was another ‘problematic’ figure of Bhakti movement. She followed the path of Bridal Mysticism, but in a much more revolutionary mode. Her powerful lyrics, dominant actions and threatening life style of a solo wanderer fashioned several social and cultural revolutions. Her lyrics are analysed from the side of a woman who questioned the society by exposing her physical nudity and individual soul. A study of her verses (*vachanas*) proves that her in depth passion and devotion towards her Lord, is an outcome of her sheer conditioning. Her lyrical compositions are comprised of Akka’s strong erotic images, similes and metaphors of their sexual union originating certainly inside her heart. The Lingayat tradition and Veerasaiva movement is also explained in the backdrop of Akka Mahadevi.

The fourth chapter “Body and Beyond: An Analysis of Later Bhakti Poets—Lal Ded and Mirabai” is framed to analyse the lyrical compositions of Lal Ded and Mirabai. As in the earlier chapter, like Andal and Akka Mahadevi, Lal Ded and Mirabai were ardent devotees belonging to Saivite and Vaishnavite sects. The chapter aims at exploring their verses as pure manifestations of love, emotions, passion and desire towards their favorite deity. The representation of their intense love and desire is the tool of expressing their freedom and autonomy. The first half of the chapter deals with the life and verses of Lal Ded, the Kashmir mystic. Her verses (*vakhs*) are in the form of philosophical statements and teachings, not just devotional melodies. They carry messages of harmony and peace. Like her predecessors human body and physical desires were her strong subject matter. Apart from physical body, she speaks about beyond body. She focused more on the subject of emptiness of the body rather than on bodily flesh. Hence, her lyrics represent the physical as well as the metaphysical. The quality of her verses transition from that of a sage to an analyst, from a pastor to an intense dedicated lover and later to that of a pure yogini who is in search of eternal bliss. Her lyrics are direct manifestations of her religious insights and the skills of a brave mystic, who was alert in the intense religious segments and mystical performances of Kashmir Saivism. In her lyrics, the physical body occupies major significance as it is the centre to all her experiments in self-refinement. She illustrated human love throughout her verses. The next saint, Mirabai is the most celebrated mystic saint of India. Her verses (*padas*) portray the epitome of *prema bhakti* and are considered as classic pieces of medieval Indian literature. The lyrics of Mira convert an ardent devotee into the mood of transcendental bliss. They manifest the cry of a passionate devotee from the inner soul, lamenting, with intense longing of profound love to embrace eternity. Her verses produced voices that could not be voiced in her days. Those lyrics were spontaneous

versions of pure love songs originating from the heart of an ardent lover. Humanity in its finest form is witnessed in Mira's verses. Like the other female mystics, Mira too expresses her desire to join with her lover, Lord Krishna. Her personal feelings, emotions and the intense desire for the unification with her beloved is expressed directly in her lyrics. The sensuous verses of Mira prove that she is a submissive partner driven by mad love. Her lyrics portray images in relation with feminine body. She chose straight language to express her thoughts and desires. Her songs manifest the intense depth of her liberal love in its topmost forms.

The fifth chapter "Body as Resistance: Re-Contextualising the Works of Female Bhakti Poets" incorporates the idea of resistance in the verses of Andal, Akka Mahadevi, Lal Ded and Mirabai. This section portrays the voices of protest and resistance from the part of these medieval mystics. Resistance by women is far different from that of the vigorous revolutions and agitations from that of men. In history, resistances are always conducted by submissive sections of the society especially women, peasants, laymen and so on. These mystic poets composed their verses in relation with their personal experiences and inner desires. Here, their physical body is the tool of their resistance. It also acts as sites of celebration of pleasure. Their emotional desires, deep and passionate love and sexual cravings shaped the major themes of their verses. The arrangement of these themes in the backdrop of devotion marks them different from that of other medieval Indian poets. The ardent devotion to the favourite deity and the ultimate passion to unite with him form the core of their verses. This physical as well as metaphysical unification that travels within body and beyond body portray their way of resistance against the medieval norms of patriarchy and conventions. This sensuality of their verses frames the nucleus of their resistance struggle. Their verses celebrated their own body and its bodily desires. For these mystic saints, their body was never a liability,

but an abode of extreme happiness, pleasure and celebration. Andal, being a female lover and poet expressed her love in public through her lyrics. This declaration was a shock to the patriarchal system. The erotic nature present in her verses, especially of *Nacciyar Tirumozhi*, marks her as extremely revolutionary in defining her intense personal desires and bodily cravings. Her feminine body, passionate love and the grief of separation constitute Andal's love verses making them quite rebellious in nature. Similarly, Akka Mahadevi was a complete rebel of her times who tried to break the shackles of the macho-masculine world. Being born and brought up as a Lingayat follower, she stood under the same sect and questioned the anarchies inside Lingayatism. Her verses describe the celebration of her physical body and her intense bodily desires which were taboos during medieval era. On the other hand Lal Ded, the Kashmiri mystic, composed her verses in the form of philosophical teachings and these teachings were the tool of her resistance against patriarchy. Her lyrics questioned the consumerist attitude of medieval man. She chose literal concepts, images and metaphors from the nearby surroundings which broke the medieval style. Her lyrics proves that by with-holding the human physical body and its sensual desires, she opened a word of metaphysical body in the state of transcendence. She tried to elevate ordinary women from their domestic lives to another sphere where they could express themselves. Lal Ded's verses prove that she sang and danced in ecstasy. Mirabai, the most well-known mystic saint expressed her love in the form of *dasya bhava*. She reached the top of her defiance when her passionate love was questioned by her royal family. Her poetry has aristocratic roots and elite genealogy. Still, through her lyrics, she stood for the women in general, the women caught in love. The conscious use of phrases such as 'I', 'I am', 'I have', etc., in her verses signifies her internal strength to express her feminine identity

and freedom. Her poetry draws the pictures of an unreal world around her. Mira actually resisted this unreality and falsehood of the society.

The sixth chapter “Recommendations” discusses the advance scope of the study in literary, cultural and academic fields. It provides brief details on how the research in the topic of Indian devotional literature can be further developed into its other related areas on the backdrop of Bhakti poetry and related medieval Indian poets.

By tracing the deep rooted scheme and exercise of Bhakti even today, one comes to the conclusion that, Bhakti movement had not just originated in the sixth century and eloped somewhere in seventeenth century. On the other hand, it has increased its boundaries to many other sides which later unite with contemporary life psychology, sociology and politics. With all its positive aspects like liberation of human psyche, improvement of knowledge, self-realisation and so on, the notion of Bhakti becomes a significant power that binds human beings to his/her karma to succeed the final state of moksha in literal as well as other senses.

Chapter 1

On Devotee and Deity: An Introduction to Bhakti Literature

While taking a historical glance into the cogent voices of medieval India, one would arrive at that weird ground occupied by numerous mystic saints and devotees, where Bhakti (Devotion) stood as a dynamic weapon. According to the words of Satish Chandra in his book *History of Medieval India*:

The Bhakti movement which stressed mystical union of the individuals with God had been at work in India long before the arrival of the Turks. Although, the seeds of Bhakti can be found in the Vedas, it was not emphasized during the early period. The idea of the adoration of a personal God seems to have developed with the growing popularity of Buddhism. During the early centuries of the Christian era, under Mahayana Buddhism, the Buddha began to be worshiped in his 'gracious' form (avalokita). The worship of Vishnu developed more or less at the same time. When many of the holy books, such as the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, were re-written during the Gupta times, Bhakti was accepted, along with *jnana* and *karma*, as one of the recognized roads to salvation. (190-191)

The Bhakti poets therefore preached and conveyed their ideas to their favorite deity directly. In the book *The Bhakti Movement: Renaissance or Revivalism?* P. Govinda Pillai denotes:

Among the multifarious, religious, philosophical, social and political movements which contributed to the formation of India and her culture, the Bhakti of the medieval period (fourteenth to seventeenth centuries) was undoubtedly the most pervasive and persistent. (3)

The Bhakti movement was therefore a stirring idea that constructed a significant space along with an array of unique poetic faces to the notions of Sanskrit scriptures. By trans-creating the early epics and legends such as the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata* and the *Bhagavata Purana*, almost all the modern Indian languages, except Tamil, were given a new form and style (Pillai 3). Being a revolutionary countercultural movement, it accepted general public from all divisions of the society. The movement violated the existing medieval norms and conventions of religion, caste, gender and community and invited people from every caste and creed. The poets of Bhakti literature always showcased a basic nature for complete attachment and perfect submission to their God. The unending quest for eternal freedom can be identified as the nucleus of Bhakti movement. In the book *History of Medieval India* Satish Chandra points out, “The development of popular Bhakti took place in South India between the seventh and twelfth century” (190). Shahabuddin Iraqi in his book *Bhakti Movement in Medieval India: Social and Political Perspectives* says that:

The bhakti age in South India is said to have lasted from the sixth century to the end of the Vijayanagara empire. In the earlier phase, a number of bhakti saints, endowed with poetic and musical talents, wandered from place to place, singing hymns in praise of different deities, and drew their followings from among the common people. (103)

The Bhakti literature is highly significant in the study of Indian literature because it brought about a new space with the vernacular languages and can be identified as an ‘other’ of the mainstream Sanskrit literature written by the elite class. It can also be identified as a major counter-cultural movement because while the main philosophical rudiments of thought were firmly designed for the elite class, Bhakti as a progressive movement emerged to become a normative lifestyle for a considerable sect of people,

especially to the non-elite class, in its pan Indian scene. The significance of the particular tradition was that it helped to bring the idea of God within the range of all public segments of Indian society regardless of their caste, creed or social ranks. By continuously challenging the rites, rituals and spiritual notions of the medieval culture, the Bhakti movement fashioned a diverse genre of dissent against the class-caste obstructions, communal strategies and gender concerns. Accordingly, the idea of Bhakti movement got spread to a larger communities of common people who were previously kept away from the fixed fabrics of Sanskrit and other high class clutches. Prof. Avadhesh Kumar Singh in his book *Revisiting Literature, Criticism and Aesthetics in India* points out that, "...distinctions such as caste, learning, beauty, family, wealth and profession among others that had plagued Hindu society for long are removed..." (300). The biographical details of Bhakti poets showcases that most of them initially had an intuition of sense of wonder, the vital crave for freedom and deliverance, personal devotion, spontaneity, impulsiveness, communal worship and so on (Rajagopalachary and Rao 1).

The historical origin of the movement can be certainly traced from the comments of historians and critics such as Satish Chandra, P. Govinda Pillai, Shahabuddin Iraqi, Hiran Gohein, Manager Pandey and so on. Shahabuddin Iraqi in the Introduction to his book *Bhakti Movement in Medieval India: Social and Political Perspectives* notes that Bhakti movement started from AD 9th century with the birth of Adi Sankara and was continued by a number of Hindu devotees and religious reformers up to the twentieth century. Adi Sankara tried to bring the scripted Vedas and Upanishads into the dominion of knowledge (Iraqi 15). According to the findings of Iraqi, during the Sultanate period (Muslim rule), the Indian society was absolutely packed with several anomalies such as tough and rigid caste system, blind rites and rituals, polytheism, untouchability,

discriminations based on economic status (*chaturvarnya*), etc. The Bhakti poets such as Kabir, Surdas, Mirabai, Ramananda lived during these periods. The elite status of the society was entirely under the monopoly of Brahmins. The extensive discontent and hostility against the prevailing communal evils was the foremost reason behind the development of Bhakti movement. Even though spirituality and devoutness were the major themes of Bhakti, the literary verses proved to be an inspiring and thrilling melody of the subaltern in their diverse manifestations of revolt as well as resistance. Through charmingly constructed linguistic diction, a seemingly conservative phenomenon became a sturdy weapon against the conventional social hierarchies of many religious customs and injustice. This makes Bhakti movement on par with the European renaissance struggles as it resulted in great advancement in the societal value system to directly impact a range of social circles like arts, politics, culture, literature, religion and so on. On one side the movement as a whole expresses the beauty and reality of human life, an intense desire and passion for freedom and autonomy, a rebellion against the caste hegemony and so on whereas the on the other side the movement exposes the entire falsehood of the world, and detachment from the worldly life. The Bhakti poets were in the forefront to raise their voice against discouraging evil practices such as Sati, adultery and infanticide. They also encouraged people in the ban of liquor, tobacco and all other kinds of drugs.

The term Bhakti is derived from the root word 'bhaj' and the suffix 'ktin'. Kannada writer C. N Ramachandran in his article, "Bhakti as Celebration of Life" marks that 'Bha' means 'to serve' or 'to share or 'to participate' (Ramachandran 31). It helps a devotee to serve, share and participate with the divine experience. K. S. Narayanachar in his article "Nuances of Bhakti in the *Ramayana*" defines Bhakti as:

Bhakti, accordingly to the highest traditions of philosophical and religious thought in India, is living for God and living in God, in thought, feeling and deed. God-union, which *Vedantins* call *Sayujya*, and which in the *Summum Bonum* of all philosophical and religious endeavor, is described by Sage Yajnavalkya as a fulfilled experience of union between the lover and the beloved, that knows nothing of other external or exterior aspects and of nothing higher or superior in taste. (17)

Even though Adi Shankara and Ramanuja followed the *jnana marga*, it is generally found that *jnana* when matured or clearly developed becomes devotion and vice-versa. K. S. Narayanachar asserts that according to Ramanuja, Bhakti can be considered as a form of love that is constant and valiant. According to Ramanuja, Bhakti is a species of wisdom and knowledge, and that which overflow and develops into pure love (Narayanachar 18). The four *purusharthas* are Dharma, Artha, Kama and Moksha. Bhakti is regarded as the complete manifestation of these four stages and is the fifth *purushartha*. Also, Bhakti is the epitome of nine *rasas*. They are *Shringara* (love/beauty), *Hasya* (laughter), *Karuna* (sorrow), *Raudra* (anger), *Veera* (heroism/courage), *Bhayanka* (terror/fear), *Bibhatsa* (disgust), *Adbutha* (surprise/wonder) and *Shantha* (peace) described in *Natyasastra* and treated as the tenth *rasa*.

The movement had its impacts on the minds of large groups of Indian folks from the early sixth century onwards. Being a mass communal reformation strategy, the movement attempted to establish a society deeply rooted in the principles of egalitarianism. Bhakti as a counter-cultural movement influenced various fields such as literature, fine arts and music at one level. It has also contributed to the process of unification and integration on a pan Indian level, as it opposed the social issues of caste

and gender. Sanskrit was used as major language of ‘knowledge’ which was inaccessible by the common man. Vedas, Upanishads, epics and so on were mostly written in Sanskrit and was kept as a secret from laymen. The use of vernacular languages by the Bhakti poets demystified the above mentioned ‘knowledge’ and helped the general public understand them. As mentioned earlier, the movement spread on a large scale and later became a pan Indian movement by fourteenth century when its threshold spread to North India (Rajagopalachary and Rao 2). This tradition helped to create a seminal account of spiritual literature in the forms of hymns, songs and melodies and was sung across by several poets in their own languages. American poet and translator Andrew Schelling in his book, *The Oxford Anthology of Bhakti Literature*, defines Bhakti poets as those who “stands with the bravest poets across our planets” (xvi). He also remarks:

Their songs have migrated not just across India, but also into Europe and the Americas. They are collaborators in the effort to find the dimensions of the human heart and mind, and to readjust the world we live in – to wrench or crack it open – so we might drop old prejudice. (xvi)

The songs of the Bhakti poets have later appeared in the European and American continents in translated forms. Those songs filled with immense love, dedication, adoration, humanity, freedom, autonomy and quest for the Self attracted people across the world. Later several translators from various parts of the world worked on the interpretation of Bhakti songs and Bhakti cult.

Instead of portraying a silent reflective attitude towards any particular God/deity, the Bhakti verses showcased a kind of ardent, unyielding and existentialist approach to the personal experiences of devotee. Schelling further explains that there is no doubt that the Bhakti roots trace the old difficult and intimidating hunger for deep human

autonomy, an intellect on the unfathomable and curious secrecies of the mortal world and the very brave conviction that every human being holds certain kind of deep passionate distinct relationship, warmth, love or affection with that mystery. He points out that there are several similar cases in Native American vision quest music, the Afro-American gospels, the blues, and labor protest songs and especially in the experimental and the liberation impulses found in international modernist and postmodern poetry (Schelling xiv). He further explains:

What sets the poets of Bhakti apart from their classical Sanskrit or Tamil predecessors – transforming them into a prominent *counter-cultural* force – is their resolve to match life and poetry. To live by what they sing, no matter the stakes. Some bhakti poets gathered around themselves ‘communities of dissent’ in their own lifetimes. As much as they drew from the traditions of India – both the so called ‘Great’ and so called ‘Little Traditions’ – the passions give speech in their poems were designed to shatter any fetters of belief what would limit the ferocity of experience. (xv)

The Bhakti cult was a counter-cultural movement against the social atrocities of medieval period. It was not organized into a particular period, specific location, or a group of leaders. Instead, it evolved and continued all over the medieval Indian sphere with various hues. The songs of Bhakti matched the lives of common man with poetry. Those lyrics stood for social enlightenment. They drew sources and themes from the Indian traditions and cultures.

The Hindu revival happened after the decline of Jainism and had rented several Jain practices and precepts even though opposed the non-Vedic religion tooth and nail. The *yagnas* never returned. Even though the *varnasrama* system came back with the supremacy of Brahmins in the later stages, the early pioneers inscribed sameness of each

person before the Almighty. The pioneers of Bhakti chanted Vedic mantras in several forms and Epics and *Puranas* were considered as basic texts. There were notable poets who translated these Sanskrit texts into the vernacular languages or either composed its adapted versions. These new versions were created to suit the new social milieu and hence the modern Indian languages were formed.

In the Northern regions, the Guptas were Vishnu devotees. The Chalukyas followed the attempt and brought this to the East and Deccan regions. They brought it up to Venkatom and today, Tirupati Venkateswara temple of Lord Vishnu is a famous pilgrimage centre.

Saivism too has a Northern connection, especially Kashmir. It is said that the Vedic deity Rudra merged with the Himalayan tribal deity to form Lord Shiva. The early Nayanars and Thirumoolas believed that Shiva resided at Kailas and came to the South to visit Agasthya to finally settle there to write and propagate his *Thirumantras*. Some other Nayanars, Karaikkal Ammaiyar and Appars claim that Lord Shiva appeared before them at Himalayas and asked them to carry out his mission in the South. However the Bhakti movement of the South was quite different from that of the North where they gave emphasis to intellectual aspects. In the South, it was emotions, not intellect that played significant role in the dances, songs and so on of the Alvars and Nayanars (Pillai 55-58).

In short, Nayanars are the devotees of Shiva. It is said that there are sixty three Nayanars and among them five or six are the famous ones. The earliest of the Nayanars was Thirumoolar, who claimed that he belonged to the abode of Shiva, Mount Kailas. His poems often offer a special outlook on human body and soul. He did not believe that the soul would survive the body. He sticks to the materialist concept that when the body

dies, the soul too becomes dead. He on no account opposed the practice of temple worship but always reminded that Shiva not only resides inside it, but everywhere outside. For him, nature itself was Shiva and Shiva was nature. Nayanar began his task at the period when the Saivites were divided and practiced according to several sections like *Kapalikas*, *Pasupathas*, etc. His' was the initial effort to marginalize such sections and put forward a monotheistic Saivism with many rational ideas.

Karaikkal Ammaiyar was one among the renowned women Bhakti poets of Tamil. She is often compared to Akka Mahadevi and Mirabai. She had portrayed her relation with her beloved lord as almost parallel to that of two lovers. She often loses herself in ecstasy and trances while she composes her lyrics, singing or dancing. She called herself '*pey*' which means lunatic (Pillai 62).

Appar belongs to the second generation of Saivites. As per *Periya Puranam*, he belongs to the caste of Vellala (below Brahmins but above untouchables) and was from Tanjavur. He was born to a Saivite family but later lived as a Jain. There is a tale that describes how he returns to Saivism. The story is that he had suffered a stomach illness and had severe pain. His sister prayed to Lord Shiva and her true devotion cured him. Hence, Appar returned to his family beliefs of Saivism. His influence converted the Kanchi monarch Mahendravarman 1 to Saivism. From then, the entire Pallava Empire became monopoly of Saivism and the Nayanar doctrine. His admirers called him by the name *Thirunavukkarasu*. His Bhakti philosophy is classified into two genres – Nirguna and Saguna (Pillai 62-63).

Sambhandar was a contemporary figure of Appar. The Pandyas of Madurai region were won over to Saivism by the efforts of Sambhandar. A notable characteristic of Sambhandar is that he always held his head high and did not bow even to Lord Shiva.

He claimed to be a part of his God and that he was born with that consciousness. His poems in praise of his Lord are hardly a humble devotee's intense longing for ultimate salvation (Pillai 66).

The next notable Nayanar is Sundarar. The *Thevaram* collection contains almost 1000 verses of Sundarar. His chief texts are the combinations of his objective and subjective experiences and problems. He also produced the book *Tiru-thondar-tohai*, which means a collection of stories of devotees (Pillai 67-68).

Manikkavachakar, meaning the 'speaker of gems' is the next prominent Nayanar. This name was conferred upon him by his admirers. He believed himself to be Lord Shiva who appeared in the form of a human being to find out his potential devotee and shower his blessings upon the devotee. His two books – *Thirukaviar* and *Thiruvachakam*, which deals with his values and hymns admiring Shiva, have survived more than a millennium. Most of his verses need the value of solitary meditation. This meditative mode also points to the decline of Bhakti from a popular movement to an elite exercise for individual salvation. He appears at the end of Bhakti movement, ninth century (Pillai 71).

Nandanar, is the 'untouchable Saint' of the Nayanar creed. He was born in a *Pariah* family unit of untouchables in lower Kaveri basin. Because of being inferior in caste, he was not able to enter temple, see the Shiva idol and worship. It is said that Shiva himself asked the granite structure of his vehicle, (bull) to move aside, so that Nandanar could see him. The legend of Nandanar joining the *Sivalinga* in the lime light of the deity's prowess and disappearance may be a subterfuge after eliminating him by means of worse tactics by the casteist Hindus. He was both a rebel and martyr to his cause (Pillai 76).

The Alvars, Vishnu devotees, were mainly twelve in number. They are placed in between the eighth, ninth and tenth centuries by historians. The verses and hymns that the Alvars sang are contained in Nath Muni's *Nalayira Prabandham*. They were of both high castes and low caste. Tiruppan Alwar was an untouchable and Andal was the only woman member out of them. The Hindu tradition mentions about some supernatural legends behind the birth of several Alvars. Thus, Poygai Alwar is said to have sprung from a lotus flower and Puttalvar from a *madhavi* flower. Periyalvar was born from a red lotus in a well and Andal was discovered as a baby lying in the flower garden of Periyalvar. The supernatural stories still continue based on the birth and lives of Alvars.

The Bhakti tradition is so vast and diverse and henceforth it is difficult to approach every literary work using the same tool of analysis. A. K Ramanujan in the Introduction to his book *Speaking of Shiva*, points out that critics of Bhakti literature, like V. Raghavan, identify the movement as a powerful outbreak against social hierarchies in the early Indian society. Ramanujan points out, "...bringing the high to the low, esoteric paradox to the mass in the street, transmuting ancient and abstruse ideas into live contemporary experiences; at the same time, finding everyday symbols for the timeless" (39).

Ramanujan clearly points out the demystification nature of Bhakti literature that could transgress the boundaries of epistemological hierarchies and thereby serve a high philosophy in the plates of the common man where they can enjoy the beauty, taste the essence and digest the philosophy. He also emphasizes on the cross cultural interactions of Bhakti poets by the means of travel. He says:

Both Kabir of Hindi region, and Caitanya of Bengal, were inspired by southern precedents. Chronologically from seventh century on, century after century, bhakti movements have arisen in different regions and languages, spanning the

whole Indian sub-continent, in Tamil, Kannada, Marathi, Gujarati, Hindi, Bengali, Assamese, and Punjabi roughly in that order. Like a lit fuse, the passion of bhakti seems to spread from region to region, from century to century, quickening the religious impulse. Arising in particular regions, speaking the local spoken languages, it is yet inter-regional – both ‘parochial’ and ‘universal’. (39-40)

In fact, Bhakti was not a fresh notion to the Indian tradition. It is as old as Hindu religion. But when set in the milieu of sociopolitical and economic magnitudes it has much more dimensions than that of a simple religious practice. In short, one could say that it deals with caste, gender and regional language. But apart from that, in other circumstances Bhakti movement can be recognized as an Indian response against the Islamic invasions as well as their religious styles. Especially in the Northern part of India, the movement flourished during the Sultanate period. But, the interesting part is that several liberating styles and principles of life between the Muslim saints and Hindu saints accordingly created a religious harmony during the later periods. Because of the participation of Sufi saints, the Islamic concepts had significant roles in spreading liberal ideas. The two basic notions of Islam that highly inspired Bhakti saints are Unity of God and Equality of human beings (Iraqi 109).

The Bhakti poets emphasized upon monotheism and according to them Ram and Allah were one Supreme head. They considered Bhakti as superior to knowledge and hence it was only through Bhakti that one could attain complete salvation. They denied all kinds of rites, rituals and other religious customary practices considering them as pointless dogmas and believed in a nameless and shapeless God. The mind of the devotee should be totally purified, and this purification could be achieved through one’s own moral deeds. Harmony, Morality and Non-Violence were their central focus.

Unification of God by spiritual means is the basic idea of these two movements. It does not have much to do with a strict institutionalized sector of religion. In the Introduction to the book *Bhakti Movement and Literature: Re-forming a Tradition* M. Rajagopalachary and Damodar Rao points out that the emotion of Bhakti locates in two levels – public and personal. The initial one, the public sphere of Bhakti gets associated with spiritual gatherings, festivities, agitations, turmoil and other such activities. Spiritual *bhajans*, grand ceremonials or celebrations like *Kumbhamela* or *Rathayatra*, *Brahmotsavams*, religious carnivals at local temples of small villages and *Jataras* celebrating village deities are certain instances for the manifestations of Bhakti in public cultural sphere. These gatherings and celebrations naturally become the meeting points of pan Indian and local ethnicities. On the other side, in personal spheres, Bhakti is conveyed in the form of hymns, songs or poems composed of the extreme devotion for a deity or deity's personae by expressing the devotee's intense love or surrender to God in various ways. For instance, the relation concerning the devotee and the deity might be of a lover and beloved, servant or master or of a guide and benefactor. The Bhakti movement entirely captured all these traits and displayed them at both these levels (2).

Within the Indian public sphere, Bhakti becomes a social movement of protest against caste, class hierarchies, religious or gender inequalities. Christian Lee Novetzke mentions in his essay "Bhakti and Its Public" that historically no other single communal movement has cohered on the subject of Bhakti and its sentiments. On the other hand, one could easily find several religious communities, rites, rituals, bodies of texts, and so on that makes Bhakti a stirring principle. Numerous academic scholars mention about Bhakti movement as composed of a unified, if heterogeneous, fields of texts and practices produced and maintained in south Asia over the last two millennia (257-258).

The book *Viraha Bhakti*, written by Friedhelm Hardy narrates certain significant traits found between the devotional texts of South India, especially of Tamil and the *Bhagavata Purana*, which he mentions as ‘opus universale’ – a devotional manuscript composed in South India during A.D 10th century and later found throughout the Indian subcontinent by the beginning/end fifteenth century (489-491). It is interesting to note that a single piece of text can work as a modal for Bhakti in the case of its public appeal and reception over several centuries later. Apart from the philosophical discourse that the Bhakti movement had put forward and the charismatic poetic verse that many poets composed, there developed a strong sense of Bhakti (as devotion/ritual) throughout India. Rituals performed at temples especially by the Brahmin community had an impact on the beliefs and customs of the other communities including the Kshatriyas.

The popularity of the text *Ramayana* and its different versions like *Adhyatmaramayanam Kilippattu*, *Ramavatara Charitra*, *Ramayanu*, *Saptakanda Ramayana* and so on including several folk forms of the story of Rama showcase a narrative outbreak of Bhakti into the minds of the people irrespective of caste, creed, geography and language. Many of these versions surpassed the boundaries of Sanskrit language and thereby helped the narrative to merge with the popular minds. Local stories claiming the presence of Rama in their towns and villages across India are plenty. For instance, a place at Tirunelli temple, in Wayanad district of Kerala is said to be the place where Rama once sat with grief of his father’s demise. There are three places in Rameswaram where the locals claim that Hanuman, the monkey God, jumped to cross the ocean while a temple at Rameswaram in Tamil Nadu and Jataayuppura at Chadayamangalam in Kollam district of Kerala is considered as the place where Jatayu, the demi-God bird in the Hindu epic *Ramayana* fell after a fight with Ravana. This shows that the narrative has transgressed the traditional geographical boundaries and

started living along in different geographical locations. It is interesting to note that the text has been accepted and well received by the elite public especially the Brahmin community who had command over Sanskrit over a period of time.

Christian Lee Novetzke points out in his article “Bhakti and Its Public” that by the end of Gupta Empire and during the reign of Pallavas and Pandyas in the South, there occurred a sudden upsurge in the constructions of large temples funded by royal wealth. These helped to create ‘an abode’ or home for the religious deities and loci for public worship. This social system provided several rituals and practices associated with devotion including the visual contact with a divine deity (darsan) and offering devotional goods like flowers, leaves, milk products, etc., to the worshiping deity (pooja). These devotional techniques were thus followed in individual homes and the later transformations of the societal economy of worship and devotion could easily connect several significant relationships in the growth and development of vernacular literature that bears the themes of devotion. These regional writings and its sudden developments paved the way for the production of more texts in vernacular languages all over India. In the midst of these cross currents of vernacular literature along with its wide spread popularity and the sudden openings for the public spheres of devotion, the rudiments of devotion on its public performative expressions could be easily found in the forms of dramas, classical and Sufi dances, theatrics and musical melodies, hymns songs and so on (259).

As a result of Bhakti movement and its widespread acceptance all over India, writers started writing in the vernacular languages and a perfect basis was set for the establishment of contemporary Indian languages. The mainstream literature moved away from the early tradition of these languages giving way to a vibrant and autonomous way of new thought process. Thus, it can be argued that the Bhakti poetry

to a great extent could free itself from the formalisms of ancient Indian poetics, medieval feudalistic culture and from the themes of majestic royal courts. The compositions can be read as expressions in the common man's language with humanistic sentiments. The cultural consciousness, philosophies and feelings conveyed in Bhakti literature are more strictly associated with human culture and civilisation of the medieval period and that of ancient ethnicity of Indian culture and literature.

The Bhakti wave was evidently recognized as a movement that opposed feudalism and communal structures of medieval India. It portrayed the anti-humanistic dogmas of medieval society in their numerous features and forms. Apart from that, the movement also conveyed the spirits of revolt and dissents against the elites. The influence of this rebellion and its continuous resistance against the feudalistic medieval culture were not articulated in any forms of arts or literature until the popular folks found its manifestation in Indian devotional poetry. The themes, beliefs, principles and the widely held expressive designs of Bhakti poetry were completely independent from the poetic forms, designs and guidelines of Sanskrit or any other medieval imperial and classical languages.

Manager Pandey in his work "Bhakti Poetry: Its Relevance and Significance", points out that the literature hence created for the masses were not only important in the relations to its forms and themes, but also appeared diverse from the set-ups of former traditionalist literature written in elite languages such as Sanskrit, Pali, Prakrit or Apabhramsha. The spirit of these poetical texts finds its origins from the common life style and practices of general masses. These verses are exceptionally dissimilar from that of classical Sanskrit poetical versions. Regional literature entered into a new sector of advancement and expansion. Poetry was liberated from the shackles of formalism and feudal structures and entered into common people's culture. They are normally more

advanced form of folk literature or folk culture. The poetic composition charms of Bhakti verses stems from the spoken and indigenous ethnicity of rural village songs of suburban India. Its musical formulae are much similar to that of Hindi, Marathi, Kannada, medieval Tamil or Malayalam. This was the very initial phase in the Indian history where the spoken language of general folks harmonised much closer to the poetic language. For the first time, the artificial gap stuck between the so called literariness of orthodox poetic language and sheer impulsiveness of everyday language was joined. The originality and uniqueness of subject and format of Bhakti poetry are not so easy to be described in the conservative critical context. An additional critical construction which is completely liberal from the orthodox archetypes and the continuing lyrical conducts is greatly necessary for the comprehensive examination, explanation and critical assessment of the devotional poetry of common masses (129-130). He quotes:

Free from Sanskrit, Pali, Prakrit and Apabhransha, literatures in regional language entered into a new phase of growth and development. Consequently, Indian literature and culture broke the shackles of feudalism and seem to have headed towards a more creative, peoples culture. Bhakti poetry, liberated from the formalism of ancient poetics, feudalism culture and from the courtly atmosphere, is an expression of people's culture – their emotions in their own languages. Cultural awareness, ideologies and sensibilities expressed in the Bhakti movement and its literature are more closely related to culture and society of its own times than to ancient traditions of Indian culture and tradition. (129)

Therefore, it is much more essential to evaluate the previous historical background from where the cultural or ideological movement initially evolved and later spread in search of its original source for the central idea. Pandey is of the opinion that Bhakti has

altogether become a social and political movement when the intellectual arena of a society started thinking in a new way because of the impact created by Bhakti literature.

He remarks:

It has often been seen in the history of cultures and idea that a certain idea remains in the historical process as an abstract concept and when it finds a conducive social context, it takes the form of comprehensive movement. The concept of Bhakti have been very old as an idea and an emotion but it evolved as a widespread cultural movement only in the period between 12th and 17th centuries. (131)

Bhakti as a movement had several manifestations in the society. The meaning of Bhakti varies for each sect of people. Some people read, recited and got delighted in Bhakti songs merely to guarantee themselves a heavenly abode after their demise. Several others practiced these compositions for their individual growth in this world whereas various others explored Bhakti literature as an exact method of devotion. There are many others who considered devotional poetic compositions as an honest desire to hold back the traditions i.e. to summon Bhakti literature as an ideal period in the socio-cultural history of medieval India. There occurs slight variances for those people who in the name of Bhakti movement as well as Bhakti literature take some researches on the social and cultural norms of medieval era in their poetic works. They later recognized several practical relations in them and celebrated these works and organised lists of names of foodstuffs, attires, ornaments, etc., dominant in those ages. For a scholar of cultural studies on history, the poems act as a cultural artefact that provide them with ample illustrations on the medieval life, culture, attitudes, ideas of gender formations, caste hierarchies, relationships between the human and the divine, servant and the master, king and the public, soul and body, etc. Pandey quotes:

Some of them read bhakti literature only to ensure a place for themselves in heaven. Others use Bhakti literature to progress in this world as well as in the other. Some of them see Bhakti literature as a traditional form of worship and yet others, with a desire to give the present a semblance of the past, summon Bhakti literature as a golden age in the cultural history. (131)

Several narrative poems draw a clear picture on physical objects of the past; for instance, attire, ornaments, food, furniture, architecture, geography and so on. Thus it can be argued that literature of Bhakti act as a cultural material, like several other early poems, that preserve the pastness of the past.

On the other hand, there are several modernist thinkers who completely neglect this aim. Several narrative poems draw clear picture on physical objects of the past; attire, ornaments, contexts of Bhakti literature; and discuss only about its contemporary status and relevance. Some critics fail to identify that the present is always connected with the past and the future; thus without going much deeper into the actual context of a literary text it is very difficult to draw parallels in the present. Studies on Bhakti literature clearly showcase the historical and political nuances of the time. Therefore, a mere close reading of the text might be a reductionist approach.

It is necessary to analyse and interpret the aesthetic and artistic excellence of Bhakti poems and the growth and development of an extensive pan Indian social movement with respect to the socio-cultural scenarios as Walter Benjamin observes that it is not sufficient to examine a literary text as an experience of the past but significant to examine a literary text that should be understood or examined considering its historical as well as present relevance (Pandey 132).

As mentioned earlier, the Bhakti poets considered their regional language as the best mode to express their emotions and opinions, rather than depending upon the very

aristocratic and ornamented languages such as Sanskrit (*Devabhasha*), Persian or Arabic. As a result, these languages lost their leading communal status. The poets wrote in vernacular languages that could be easily accessed by the general masses regardless of their class, caste or gender. For instance, the language used by Kabirdas was a combination of several languages of common usage. He chiefly used vernacular Hindi, borrowing many words from several other dialects such as Awadhi and Braj. These poems cover various aspects of human life and can be considered as a call for pure loving devotion to God. In some verses he used Bhojpuri too. On the other side, Tulsidas wrote his *Ramacharitamans*, the retelling of the Sanskrit *Ramayana*, in the vernacular Awadhi dialect of Hindi, which is popular in the Awadhi region of present day Uttar Pradesh. Another Bhakti poet Surdas used Braj dialect of Hindi (Braj bhasha), which, during those days, was considered as a plebeian language. The poems of Surdas helped to raise the status of Braj dialect from an unrefined language to a refined one. Janabai, the Marathi female poet wrote her verses (*abhangas*), in typical Marathi language. In South India, Bhakti poets like Cherusseri, Ezhuthachan, Poonthanam, et al. could create a new form and dialect and to a great extent liberate Malayalam from the clasps of Sanskrit. In one of the passages of saint Gyaneswar's Marathi translation of *Bhagavat Gita*, Arjuna asks Lord Krishna to advocate his words in simple and intellect Marathi language rather than using decorated Sanskrit. This shows there was a clear demand for the demystification of ideas and craving for knowledge in the minds of general public.

The poetic forms of Bhakti literature have much resemblance to that of folk literature and folk culture. This convention can be traced in the songs and ballads of pan Indian villages. Their musical forms are identical to the vernacular language styles and far different from that of Sanskrit. This could be the first time in Indian history, where

the language of poetry began to travel nearer to the side of spoken language rather than decorated poetic dictions.

Apart from these, there exists a very strong relation between Bhakti movement and literature as well as with the socio-economic changes taking place in the medieval period. The procedure of creation of nationalities arose with the concurrent course of the breakdown of feudalism that directly led to the development of a universal movement encompassing the growth of people's culture. This was the outcome of the continuing dissolution of feudal system and the ongoing advancement of farmers and other laymen. They possessed a strong sense of revolt which took form among the lower class (Dalits). They found their whole literary and cultural expression in saint sahitya works. These people who were illiterate because of their poor social status found the best podium to express their creativity and talent in their regional languages. Otherwise, only the upper-class had the chance to enjoy the cultural and literary spheres of the society. The growth of vernacular languages marked a fresh start of the new literary as well as sociocultural upsurge in the medieval era (Pandey 133-134).

It is very difficult for a historian to have a crystal clear image on what India was during the medieval period. This is because many of the Indian kings never paid attention to record a history of their time chronologically. Thus, India's sense of history was very well merged with the many early narratives including the great epics and legendary tales. Several writers of Bhakti and Sufi tradition during this period drew their poetic inspiration from these narratives. Several Sufi saints fashioned beautiful love poems centered on ancient myths and folk tales by blending them with the contemporary period. One such beautiful work is the epic poem *Padmavat* (1540) written by Sufi poet Malik Muhammed Jayasi. The poetic composition is an allegoric literary work that narrates the legendary story of the Delhi Sultan Alauddin Khilji's passionate yearning

for the beautiful Padmavati, the queen of Chittor. Here, Khilji and Padmavati's husband Raja Ratan Singh are both real characters of medieval period whereas Padmavati, the protagonist heroine is a fictional character. Apart from the main thread, the poem also focuses upon the character Nagmati, Ratan Singh's first wife and her emotional separation from her husband after his remarriage with Padmavati. This situation is expressed in the poetic form 'Barahmasa' (a theme common in Sufi romances), the representation of musical modes and Indian seasons in color, painted by Rajasthani artists from a social viewpoint. There lies a very deep emotional depiction of communal life and culture in this account of parting. Her emotional experience of separation is depicted by accounting communal life and culture as the actual base. Another notable point where the poet had stated his anti-feudal perception was when he had intelligently described the Delhi Sultan Alauddin Khilji as a demon like character with all the major devilish shades that a man could possess. Here, Khilji seems to be a perfect archetypal figure of the medieval feudal system. Jayasi's interpretations on the medieval social order and the feudal system were far different from that of others who considered Khilji as the 'Lord of the World' (Pandey 134-135).

According to the findings of Shahabuddin Iraqi, the Sufis in Indian society always stood for a direct as well as natural approach towards religion. He opines, "For the Sufi's India was neither *Dar-ulharb* nor *Dar-ulIslam*, but Gods earth with all sorts of people" (84). The dual circles where these people find their best expressions were religion and language. They also conveyed their great respect and encouraged the multilingual and multireligious settings of India. Also, these people exposed their enormous adoration and respect to Hindi language and cherished the Hindu religious hymns written by our Bhakti saints. They also tried to study the local dialects of Indian people at those regions where they settled and always tried to communicate with the

Indians through our languages. Hence, they played a significant role in the expansion and advancement of Indian languages, including Hindi. Their ultimate faith in non-violence has been the spirit of Indian philosophy (84). Iraqi mentions that:

... the mystic attitude towards the Hindus and Hinduism was based on sympathetic attitude and adjustment, because they believed that all religions were different roads leading to the same destination. The belief in *ahimsa*, vegetarian diets, and giving equal status to all increased the area contact with Hindus. (Iraqi 86-87)

The portrayal of the legendary tales of Rama and Krishna which Surdas and Tulsidas had used are simply born out of the Sanskrit scriptures of ancient periods. According to these poets, both these epic characters are heroes who fought against vices and stood with virtues. They are extremely courageous and welcomed a peaceful social order. Therefore, these virtuous traits of their character make them eternal heroes. In the continuous rebellion against the socioeconomic hegemony and the breakdown of feudal system, the common people mark these legendary characters as their heroes. This might be the exact reason why both these epic personalities eternal. Lord Krishna and Lord Rama establish social order by destructing the oppressive devilish tyrannical rulers, Ravana and Kamsa and thereby establish a generous social order. Manager Pandey remarks that:

Tulsi's ramarajya expresses a public desire to replace the exploitive feudalistic political order. Through this imaginary egalitarian political order is influenced by the historical limitations of the age of feudalism, it has overtly expressed Tulsi's concern for public welfare and people's desire for freedom from feudalism.

(135)

The rebellion of characters such as Rama and Krishna can be treated as an open confrontation against the aristocratic hierarchies of the time. As Pandey points it out, by talking about breaking the existing political order, these narratives give way to a new rebellious idea of breaking the existing feudal societies of India especially related to caste-ism. These aspects not only show those changes of the medieval days but also admit the fact that these changes are the seeds for a new social change in the upcoming future. Through their verses Bhakti poets problematise various issues related to the existing sociocultural hierarchies and give food for thought for self-liberation. Their poems reflect a deep-rooted desire to replace the medieval society with the concepts of equality and humanity, which provides an inner inspiration and hope for the oppressed and maltreated even today.

Concept of rebelliousness while narrating human relationships during the medieval feudalism can be traced in the works of several Bhakti poets. Surdas' description of the Radha-Krishna love and Krishna's love for other Gopikas in Vrindavan, is all set unrestricted from the traditional ethics and standards of love and lust. This notion of uncontrolled love and elucidating its source in the form of earthly human relationships is a strong blow against the feudal systems of love and wedding. It is said that no love poet in Hindi is as great as Surdas. His lyrics are filled with the abundance of emotional beauty and action in the diverse periods of an individual's life such as childhood, puberty and youth. The gravity, diversity and humble completeness of simple human and princely customs of affection are found nowhere else other than in Surdas (Pandey 135).

P. Govinda Pillai in his book, *The Bhakti Movement: Renaissance or Revivalism* elucidates that the study of Bhakti tradition as a movement of resistance and renaissance begins with the examination of the intellectual advancement that began in the South,

among the Dravidian culture, especially in the Tamil speaking regions. Bhakti emerged in Tamilakam after the expansion of Buddhism and Jainism which existed for almost three centuries. Hinduism had to face strong challenges from the part of Buddhist and Jain principles. Several strong rulers were the supporters of these religions. Scholars' opinion is that the movement must have blossomed during 6th century A.D. The period just preceding it was the period of 'Didactic Poems', the Tamil Sangam age. Even though these poetic verses such as *Chilappathkaram*, *Manimeghalai*, *Jeevaka Chithamani*, etc., were truly excellent in their construction, they never hide their religious intentions pointing to Jainism or Buddhism (51).

The later Buddhist scholars chose Sanskrit as the language for their discourses, avoiding Pali. On the contrary, the Jains opted local Tamil. Therefore, during these days Buddhism in the Tamil land became the religion of the elite people whereas Jainism added its reputation among common devotees. This can easily be noticed in the early Tamil literary work *Thirukkural/Kural* written by Jain saint Thiruvalluvar, who later became a Saivite Bhakti poet and a contemporary of Appar. It later spread into the North and flourished all over India as a pan Indian movement (Pillai 51-52).

The medieval period witnessed the emergence of several Bhakti scholars in almost all parts of India who were constantly struggling to abolish the blind religious practices of the period. Some of the leading supporters of the movement were Adi Shankara, Ramanuja, Appar, Nammalvar, Tukaram, Chokhamela, Eknath, Tulsidas, Karaikkal Ammaiyar, Andal, Vallabhacharya, Kabirdas, Madhava, Surdas, Ramdas, Guru Nanak, Shri Chaithanya, Lal Ded, Mirabai, Ramananda, Chandidas, etc. Their prime purpose was to request and encourage people to worship in the humblest possible method of love, harmony and devotion.

The Bhakti movement which began in the Tamil soil gradually gained its dominance during the early medieval period and achieved success through the poems of Tamil Alvars (Vaishnavites) and Nayanars (Saivites). There were a large number of Tamil poets who hailed from both higher and lower classes of the society and shaped a challenging sphere of vernacular literature that definitely established its own authority in the popular canon (Pillai 50-54).

Avula Meenakshi, in her paper “Veershaiva Bhakti Movement and Social Reform” clearly portrays how the Veerasaiva movement led by the Bhakti saints of Karnataka influenced the social renaissance. According to her the movement began with the Lingayat follower Basavanna (1105 – 1168), the founder of the movement who preached the philosophy of monotheism, centering on Lord Shiva in the form of ‘Ishtalinga’ (an oval shaped emblem that symbolizes Lord Shiva). The Anubhava Mandapa established by Basavanna helped in the origin of Vachana style of literature in Kannada. He and his disciples communicated their thoughts, ideologies and beliefs with the common people using Kannada language, the language of the common man of Karnataka. It shaped a regional literature of considerable status in India, which later attained the power of a classical tongue. He was an actual rebel against the medieval conventions by strongly rejecting the caste system. He allowed the so called ‘untouchables’ to enter into his own house and have their lunch. He also praised the historic challenge of a high class man marrying a lower caste woman. The major philosophy of Veerasaivite movement was based on the principle called *Kayakave Kailasa*, meaning *karma* or work is the only way to reach Kailasa, the abode of Lord Shiva. Avula Meenakshi writes:

Veershaivism is a socio-religious movement that decisively shaped society in medieval Karnataka and permanently changed the contour of popular Kannada

poetry. Its aim is the elimination of the barriers of caste and the removal of untouchability. The sanctity of family relations and improvement in the status of womanhood were upheld. It gave rise to a system of ethics and education at once simple and exalted. It sought to inspire ideals of social and religious freedom, such as no previous faith of India had done. In the medieval age, this was characterized by intercommunal jealousy; it helped to shed a ray of light and faith on the forms and hearts of people. It encouraged learning and contemplation of God by means of love and faith. The excess of polytheism was deplored and the idea of monotheism was encouraged. The movement tended in many ways to raise the nation generally to a higher level of capacity both in thought and in action. (47)

Meenakshi thus clearly identifies Veerasaivism as a socio-religious movement that challenged several mainstream cultures and acted as a powerful tool to question the existing issues related to caste, gender, social status, ethics, freedom and even the idea of God.

H. S. Shiva Prakash in his paper, “Here and Now: Poetics of Kannada Vachanas: An Example of Bhakti Poetics” portrays the Vachana movement of Karnataka, which blossomed during the 12th century by strongly challenging the societal hierarchy of the Brahmin community and their rigid feudal system. It had originated among the subalterns. Shiva Prakash traces it back to Basavanna by depicting the early Kannada poets such as Channiah, who belonged to a lower caste of the society and his contemporaries namely Kakkayya and Kettiah, who also came from lower sections. There was Desimaiah, a weaver by birth and Revanasiddha, a shepherd. Contributions by these poets were compiled widely under the leadership of Basavanna. This specific age of Kannada literature witnessed the rise of nearly two hundred and more Vachana

poets and among them nearly twenty were female poets. Their brave and courageous defiance of caste, class and gender discrimination and the 'sacredness' of age-old theological prescriptions, made them to enter into an unfit fight with the aristocratic sections (6-7).

The 13th century Marathi poet Sant Gyananeswar, a mystic poet and a spiritual leader and the founder of Varkari sect, is considered to be the early exponent of Bhakti literature in Maharashtra. Being in a period where the common man is completely denied of hearing, reading or writing holy texts, Gyananeswar, an elite Brahmin man, who had different conceptions regarding *prema bhakti* which is far different from the *Bhagavata Purana* concept of Radha-Krishna love. His erotic perception of the divine pair was uncommon to the Maharashtrian tradition (Iraqi 213). T. Shyama Krishna in his article "Sant Jnaneswar: A Pioneer of Reformist Bhakti Cult" mentions that, by composing eighteen chapters of *Bhagavat Gita* (Marathi), in Ovi metre, the poet broke the doctrines of sacred texts in Sanskrit language and distributed those works to the general public in their Marathi (143). His preachings were in simple Marathi language and devotional style. His works such as *Dnyaneswari* (a well written interpretation on *Bhagavat Gita*) and *Amrutanbhav* (*The Nectar of Mystical Experience*) are considered as the milestones of Marathi literature. He stuck with the Advaita Vedanta philosophy and emphasized on Yoga culture. His legacy inspired other Varkari poets such as Eknath and Tukaram. His choice of using vernacular Marathi language for his verses seemed to be a significant alteration from the then existing feudal structure of Sanskrit and the devotional literary ways of aristocratic Hindus.

The Maharashtra Dharma itself was a movement that originated for a better social life for the lower class people of the society. A major exponent of the sect was Gyandev, who became significant because of his portrayal of erotic love between Lord

Krishna and Gopikas of Vrindavan in his text *Gyanneshwari*, which is entirely different from the 'sacred ethical' love described in *Bhagavata Purana*. This evident portrayal of erotic love theme was a new wave to the traditions of Marathi poetry. It can be compared to the 17th century Telugu speaking devadasi poet Muddupalani's text *Radhika-Santhwanam (Appeasing Radha)* which also carries the theme of erotic love between Lord Krishna and Radha.

This legacy and tradition was later followed by many Bhakti poetic saints belonging to the lower classes of the society. They strongly challenged the religious monopoly of the Brahmins and took the spiritual leadership from them, which aimed at social freedom and liberation. Some eminent poets under this category includes Namdev (1269-1344) a calico printer, Eknath (1537-1599) a Brahmin and Tukaram (1609-1650) a Kumbi, who conveyed the ideas for simple worship approaches based on love and devotion.

Class, caste and gender issues were often problematized in the works of several Bhakti poets. Chokhamela, a Marathi Bhakti poet belonging to Mahar cast writes:

Experience liberation sharing meals together

Men women children all

He gives to each whatever they fancy

Lovingly fondling every face. (Chitre 166)

The idea of equality has been presented in a simple and beautiful way. Chokhamela subtly explores various nuances of caste and gender by pointing out that all are equal before God. The very experience of sharing a meal exemplifies the development of culture and civilization, where humans move from animalistic attitudes and share their food. It is clear that Chokhamela as in the famous speech of Martin Luther King Jr

proclaims his dream of a better world where irrespective of caste, creed and gender everyone live in this world harmoniously.

The Telugu Bhakti tradition also involves Vaishnavite Bhakti saints like Annamacharya (1408-1503). Palakurthy Dinakar in his article, “Annamacharya: Exponent of Pada Kavita in Telugu Bhakti Literature” points out that it was Annamacharya who developed the Pada Kavita – the devotional songs (Keerthanams) accessible to the general public. Pada Kavitas are actually a sub-branch of the folk tradition of Karnatic music. The classical section of Carnatic music targeted only the scholarly musicians whereas the folk branch of Carnatic music was intended for the general masses. Through his verses, he repeatedly argues and quarrels with his God, Lord Venkateswara. Annamacharya is recognized as not only an ardent devotee of the Lord, but also a strong social reformer who composes poems on themes like morality and righteousness. He strongly opposed religious dogmas such as spiritual sacrifice and untouchability and declared that a devotee and his relation with the God cannot be measured by determining his/her caste, color or socioeconomic status (136 -137). According to him, God has no special consideration or recognition to any devotee based on his social status or physical beauty. He remarks:

Annamacharya has a social consciousness unlike other *Carnatic* singers such as Tyagaraja, Muthuswami Dikshithaar and Shyama Shastry who are considered to be the *Carnatic* trinity. He covered the whole range of literary reflections through his *keerthans*. (138)

Thummuri Sarath Babu in his essay “Bhakti and its Manifestations in Annamayya” also denotes that even though his hymns carry the essence ‘Sringara’ and ‘Vairgya’, the same hymns contains undercurrents of social reformation. He opposes feudal structure by pointing out that there is no difference between a king who sleeps in a silk mattress and

the peasant who sleeps on the plain floor. He reminds people about the inferior status and mortality of human beings, which is the crux of Bhakti-bhava (140). He writes:

It's like an elephant out of control.

It goes crazy again and again.

It's like mercury, never contained,

Always slipping away.

You live in me. (Rao and Shulman 53)

Annamacharya points out the very idea that God is within oneself. There is no point in searching God elsewhere. What one has in their mind is the reflection of God. The image of God depends upon the image the devotee carry in his/her mind. If the presence of God is within oneself, then it is explicit that God lies in everyone – irrespective of their caste and gender. Here, the philosophical doctrines, all of a sudden take a turn and become a political doctrine. The philosophy explains the God that a Brahmin carries within is the same God that a Sudra also holds in his heart – which means that there is no difference between a Brahmin and a Sudra. It is in this way that poets like Annamacharya take part in the literary revolution that later shook the entire roots of caste hierarchies in India.

Shahabuddin Iraqi in his book, *Bhakti Movement in Medieval India: Social and Political Perspectives* mentions the famous Bhakti saint Kabirdas (1440-1588), who provided new dimensions to the Bhakti movement in India. He never considered himself as either Hindu or Muslim. Instead, in his verses, he stated himself as a Kori (Hindu) and a Julaha (Muslim) and addresses his God as both Ram as well as Rahim. For him, mosque and temple were the same. He was never connected to any particular religious movement, but adhered himself to a universal religion and lived as a householder (*grihastha*) like the Sufi saints. All throughout his life, he practiced the Sufi ideology of

refusal (tark) not from the worldly life, but from the worldly desires, pleasures and materialistic life style. He encouraged the equal status between Brahmins and Sudras, Kabir resisted the medieval ideologies by strictly adhering to his statement that the superiority of a [wo]man is never measured by his birth, but must be decided by his worldly deeds and actions. Kabir is always mentioned for his blending of Indian Vedantas and Muslim Tasawwuf which he brought together effectively. Kabirdas strengthened the waves of Bhakti by incorporating Sufi thoughts of communal harmony and universal brotherhood. He tried to make people aware of the hypocrisies of the priests and their exploitation of people's religious sentiments. (Iraqi 144-145)

Kabir was also a strict critic of the Sultanate rule. Being the contemporary of three Lodi sultans - Bahlul Lodi, Sikander Lodi and Ibrahim Lodi, ranging the period from 1541 to 1526, he harshly criticized the Islamic government and its officials. He declared that 'There is no king equal to God' and 'To use force is tyranny though you call it lawful'. He always derisively talks about the Sultans who enjoys the glory and richness of court life and the other aristocrats, religious saints and chieftains who restlessly paid homage to and worshipped them. Exploitation and disorder in the state administration, particularly of the revenue department was a vital subject in the verses of Kabirdas. Because of his steady voice against the exploitation by revenue officials, Sikander Lodi maintained systems to check the mishandling and misconducts happening in the agricultural sector and ordered to measure the land appropriately and then fix the genuine rent. Sikandari gaz, the land survey form was thus established in the state. The sultan also strictly ordered that no one have the right to pressure the farmers for compulsory labor. Kabir's words carry his aggression and concern against the administrative powers that carried the actual responsibility of continuously exploiting the common public. The target set of Kabir were the money lenders, rich traders and the

Hindu and Muslim feudal land lords. According to him, this endless harassment makes the state a hell on earth. He was against the accumulation of massive wealth (154-155).

Pandit Jawaharal Nehru in his book *Glimpses of World History*, comments about Kabir as:

Kabir became very popular. His songs in Hindi are very well known now even in remote villages in the north. He was neither Hindu nor Muslim: he was both, or something between the two, and his followers came from both religions and all castes. There is a story that when he died his body was covered with a sheet. His Hindu disciples wanted to take it for cremation; his Muslim disciples wanted to bury it. So they argued and quarreled. But when they lifted up the sheet they found that the body for the possession of which they were quarrelling had disappeared and in its place there were some fresh flowers. The story may be quite imaginary, but it is a pretty one. (251)

Kabir's visions and ideologies constantly appeared in the verses of Dadu (1544-1603), a non-conformist and a contemporary of Akbar. Kabir's views on the monotheistic concept of God as a single being, irrespective of religion and caste can be seen reflected in the lyrics of Dadu.

Surdas, was a blind man and a strong devotee of Krishna. His language was Braja Bhasha, a Hindi dialect, spoken mostly in the Northern areas such as Agra, Delhi and Mathura. The western part of his hometown was Vrindavan, where Lord Krishna spent his entire childhood. Even though he was blind, he was able enough to recognize the voice of a person even many years after he heard it. He was a contemporary of Tanzen, the court singer of Emperor Akbar. The emperor himself was a huge admirer of Surdas. Tanzen too admired him and considered Surdas greater than himself. He was born in Delhi and lived his life in Delhi and Gujarat. His musical compositions are

known as *padas*. His guru Vallabhacharya, who advocated 'Pushti Marga' converted Surdas into the same. Being a strong disciple of Vallabhacharya, Surdas too looked at Krishna in the same way as his guru. Hence, for both of them Krishna was a flute-player, a shepherd and the lover of Radha and other *gopikas*. The absurd and irrational pranks of Krishna were celebrated by both of them (Pillai 101-102).

Guru Nanak (1469-1539) was alike Kabir, who rejected asceticism. He founded a new religion which helped in the unification of the labor class of Punjab. According to Nanak, a perfect society should give equal rights to all people to sit together, worship together and dine together. He possessed elaborate political views that entirely helped for a new spiritual renewal in the society. He was a strict critic of the administrative power and declared that the true king is God. It was God who had assigned some people on earth as emperors, kings and sultans to look after the people just like he created some other people to be traders, homemakers and even beggars. All these power structures are mere products of the Almighty. Nanak's vision on Kingship is parallel to the ideology of Sufi saints. For Nanak, a king shall not be a person who is always concerned with enjoying the societal powers and accumulating financial wealth and richness. History notes several circumstances where Nanak laments after witnessing the war between Afghans and Mughals under the leadership of Babur. The massive destruction of life and property was much painful for him. There are evidences to prove his statements after witnessing the great war of 1521. He states that the war was not only confined to the battlefield that killed thousands of men and animals, but also spread to the villages where many women and innocents were attacked. He further mentioned that it was the Pathans and Mughals who mainly contributed to the ruin of Hindustan. (Iraqi 168-169)

Nanak wrote:

More than the sacred waters of Ganga, Yamuna

And Tribeni mingled at the Sangam;
 More than the seven seas,
 More than charity, almsgiving and prayer
 Is the knowledge of Eternity that is the Lord.’
 Nanak says: He who has worshipped the Great Giver of Life
 Has earned more merit than those who
 Bathe at the sixty and eighty places of pilgrimage. (Singh 209)

Here, Guru Nanak celebrates the idea of spiritual divinity by portraying certain misconceptions of common people. He points out that those geographical spaces that are considered ‘holy’ are not as holy as God himself. For him, Ganga and Yamuna are mere places but the actual holiness lies within the heart of the being as God lies in the heart. Places of pilgrimage are just a shell not the actual life/divine. On a different level, he attacks the existing notions spread by the priestly class that God lies inside the temple. By attributing more merit to the one who directly worships God than through the mediators (priestly class), Guru Nanak is lighting the lamp of a subtle revolution against Indian feudalism.

Shahabuddin Iraqi remarks that like Kabirdas, Nanak also criticized the Muslim rulers of his period and openly called them human butchers. But at the same time, the disciples of Guru Nanak were in cordial relationship with the later Mughal ruler Akbar, who maintained a secularist attitude to all the people of his state. But this friendship was lost after the death of Akbar, especially after Jahangir came to the Mughal throne. Iraqi further observes that Nanak and his followers never believed in the system of idol worship, where God takes a physical shape. For them, God was omnipotent. Nanak’s teachings to his disciples proves that he asked them to be ideal men and live as householders depending upon their own labor (181-182).

A massive reformation by the Sikhs happened when they started institutions such as 'Sangat' and 'Pangat' which aimed at maintaining equal status and welfare by conducting programmes including mass dining. This movement made a reformative success in the age old societal conventions and promoted religious secularism based on liberal values. It helped in the promotion of a social solidarity among all the people of the society irrespective of caste, creed and gender. Moreover, in the writings of Nanak, women received a considerable space. They received respect and dignity (Iraqi 182).

During the 17th century, poets such as Prannath from Bundelkhand (the region is now spread across present Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh), emerged both as a spiritual leader and a social reformer. Prannath and his disciples had the parallel beliefs of Sikhs such as denying idol worship, mass dining irrespective of social and economic differences, and considering God of all religions is the one and the same. Like Nanak, he was against the Muslim rulers, but not against the Islam religion (Iraqi 225-227). Iraqi in his book, *Bhakti Movement in Medieval India: Social and Political Perspectives* remarks that:

The theory of the comparative universality of Hinduism with other religions like Islam and Christianity, as expressed in Prannath's *Kayamat Nama* and Ramdas's *Anandvanabhuvana*, was, in its practical form, a political statement. It changed the nature and scope of their movements from reformist to revivalist. The infusion of a strong militant Hindu revivalism was also deliberately made to provide a favorable background for getting regional political independence for themselves and their political heads. (227-228)

Goswami Tulsidas is one among the renowned figures of Hindi literature. His magnum opus, *Ramacharitramanas* still enjoys the classical status. This text not only deals with Ayodhya king Rama, but also acts as a social and political testimony when the author

describes the protagonist as a brave warrior, a dutiful and loving son and as an affectionate brother. The text does not attribute any divine attitudes to Rama. He never describes him as God or incarnation of lord Vishnu. The poet therefore has to deal with politics, society, war and human relations. Tulsidas moves into all the above areas and presents Sree Rama as an ideal figure. His early verses portray carnal love or sensuous personal experiences. They also celebrates intense longing for love (Pillai 139).

It was during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries that the Vaishnavite Bhakti movement spread all over the North East Indian regions. The most significant person of the movement in North East was Sankara Deva in Assam (Pillai 175). During his childhood days he was highly impressed by *Bhagavatha* – the great Vaishnava Purana. He began writing verses and hymns during these days. The constant reading of *Bhagavatha Purana* made him refuse the Saivite principles and accept Vaishnavism as the philosophy of his life. He infused some of the prominent Vedic thoughts into Vaishnavism. He used hymns and theoretical books to propagate his Vaishnavite cult (Pillai 178-179).

His followers, with their own distinct faith and methods of worship, were fast becoming a new community or sect in the far-flung areas of Kamarupa, the region which consists of present day Assam, Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh and their neighbourhoods (Pillai 180). He never directly criticized the issue of caste. But by accommodating outcastes (Muslims and other lower castes) he frontally exposed his mentality on the topic. Sankara Deva and his followers submitted to the new religious and societal order and therefore the North Eastern areas were largely liberated from the chains of orthodox rituals and superstitions. By refusing the exercises of great intellectuals and scholars, human/animal sacrifices and the wide rites and rituals, they preached the uncomplicated way of Bhakti that appealed to them. They hence refused the scholarly Sanskrit of

Brahminic tradition which the ordinary public found difficult to understand. In addition to the above easier and striking thoughts, the beautiful lyrical music of Sankara Deva poems and hymns fascinated them (Pillai 185-186).

The role of Chaithanya in the Bhakti movement of Indian subcontinent is always outstanding. He used Sanskrit to write his verses which made him different from the other Bhakti exponents who expressed their teachings in vernacular languages. It was the magical ambiance of Gaya (where he reached during a pilgrimage) and the magic of yogi Eswarapuri that made him enlightened. His major methods of propagating Vaishnavism were by singing group songs and conducting parades and thus increasing the number of followers. He went to the Jagannath temple at Puri in Orissa and stayed there for a long time worshipping Jagannatha. It was his disciple Nityananda, who provided a philosophical base for his Vaishnavist principles. It was the same disciple who carried Vaishnavism to the Bengal lands. Chaithanya's Vaishnavism gave prominence to emotions rather than several philosophical ideologies. Both of them opposed caste issues. But Chaithanya never emphasized it like his disciple. But Nithyananda enriched this outlook and hence made it as a major propoganda of Vaishnavism. The psalms and hymns of Chaithanya are called as *Padavali*. Jayadeva (author of *Gita Govinda*), Vidyapati and Chandidas were the three major characters that attracted and inspired Chaithanya (Pillai 192-194).

Jayadeva was the court poet of king Lakshmanasena. His *Gita Govinda* is one of the finest and sweetest verses of Sanskrit. It frequently transgresses the intelligent and sensible limits writers generally adopt in their texts and titillates the compassion of the readers as well as devotees by the erotic images of relationship between Krishna and Radha (Pillai 195-196). Vidyapathi Takur belonged to the Mithila region of North East Bihar. He could handle Mythili (his mother tongue), Sankrit and the *Ababrahmsa* of

Bengali. His poetic genius gained him the title of Poet Cuckoo of Mythili (Pillai 197-198). Chandidas was the most favourite of Chaithanya. He never sang against caste system, but his daily affairs of life prove that his caste was never a matter for him. His love life provides lyrical insights of love, which never tend to recognize the societal barriers. He always equated and compared his love to the divine love of Radha and Krishna (Pillai 200-201).

The Bhakti movement of Andhra had no pioneers like those in Karnataka. As the Telugu etymology speaks, Andhra had the tradition of worshipping Shiva (Saivism) from 6th century CE (Pillai 215). The Telugu literature rose to fame with the works of Bhakti poet Nannayya, the court poet and a philosopher. This was the period when Buddhism was 'absorbed' by Hinduism and the former lost its spirit (Pillai 216). Hindu people were classified into Saivites, Vaishnavites, Veerasaivites and so on. It was a part of Nannayya's endeavour to restore the Hindu tradition. For this he started to translate the *Puranas* and Epics into his vernacular language (Telugu). This job was allocated to him by the king. Nannayya along with Narayana Bhatta worked hard to develop the syntax, semantics and grammar of Telugu (Pillai 218-219).

Tikkana was the next prominent poet after Nannayya. He was a diplomat, warrior, philosopher and a statesman. He used his diplomatic talents in religious issues too. He advocated the concept of *Hariharanatha*—merging Hari (Vishnu) and Hara (Shiva) to unite the Vaishnavites and Saivites. It makes both gods as a single godhead. He translated *Ramayana* into Telugu with the name *Nirvachanethara Ramayana* and also fifteen chapters of *Mahabharata*. He uses 'Jana Telugu' – the language of common man. (Pillai 220-221)

Dadu, an Ahmedabad born Brahmin of sixteenth century, and his followers occupy a significant place in the Bhakti history of North India. He was a non-conformist *nirguna* bhakta and was too much dedicated to Hindu-Muslim brotherhood. Emperor Akbar, who was his contemporary was much attracted to and pleased with his teachings and principles. He only recognized God – *satguru*. He had great disapproval for the ‘human gurus’ who misread the original ideas of God. He openly claims that God and Allah are same, both his gurus. He was largely influenced by Kabir. He never valued the conventional scriptures and found them all distorted and corrupted by the so called ‘believers’. Hence, he himself composed his own compilation of holy theories from various religions and sources of Bhakti, which is known as *Panchavani*, the teachings of five various saints. It contains the aphorisms of Dadu, Namdev, Kabir, Ramdas and Mandas (Pillai 234-235). He was against the *swadharma* principle of Lord Krishna since he extolled the value and inevitability of labour. His spiritual ideas convey that the glory of life can be achieved not only by preaching and practicing spiritual ideas, but also when one lives for the humanity in general. This supports his idea which reflects caste and such religious discriminations and all other existing forms of inequality. His love and affection were not restricted to human beings alone, but embraced the whole universe (Pillai 236).

Several Marxist thinkers tried to explain Bhakti movement from social and economic perspectives. According to them the ideology of Bhakti is a complete submission of the individual as well as a rebellion. It was D. D. Kosambi, an Indian historian who first found the connection between Bhakti and feudalism in his text *The Culture and Civilization of Ancient India in Historical Outline*. Dr. Irfan Habib, another Indian historian in his book *Agrarian Sector in Mughal India*, points out that by 14th century the villages and towns of India witnessed a great development with the

expansion of industry, trade and commerce. This resulted in the widespread expansion of artisan class. The rulers and the nobles of the society demanded the production of new goods and services which, even though indirectly, helped in the economic upliftment of artisans to a certain degree. New artisans adopted new professional techniques. The lower class people found their interest to take part in this social development so that they could produce new goods which would eventually help them to achieve a new social status and dignity in the caste hierarchy system. When this upliftment happened, the artisan class attained a self-development which resulted in the breaking of caste-class issues, especially in the Indian plateaus. This development among the artisans, in a way, helped the Muslim invasions to a great extent, because, the artisans of the urban areas were actually driving hard to attain liberation and autonomy from the manacles of feudal powers (Pandey 55).

Substantiating it with the theory of Carl Marx, the forces of production and consumption has a greater significance in determining the growth and development of a community. These factors and its fluctuations can considerably change the total character of a society. By pointing out this, Dr. Rekha Pande in her journal article *The Bhakti Movement – A Historiographical Critique* remarks, “Relations which human beings enter into during the process of social life possess a specific historical and transitory character. The distribution of relations essentially coincides with the production relations”. (Pande 55-56)

Hiren Gohain in his paper entitled “The Labyrinth of Bhakti: On Some Questions of Medieval Indian History”, points out that when trade and commerce improved and the market value of products grew, it provided a self-respect and autonomy for the artisans. It also gave them new courage to think highly about their small professions. It is quite worth to mentioning here that several prominent Bhakti

poets; for instance, Kabir, who was a weaver by profession, Ravidas, worked as a shoe maker, Dadu lived as a cotton-carder were artisans. All of them were honest in their respective professions and found satisfaction in gaining economic independence and autonomy. They mocked feudal powers and worked together for the advancement of the society (1970-1972).

The entry of Bhakti literature into the Kerala zone occurred during the beginning of seventeenth century. The early literature of Kerala was written in either Sanskrit or in a mixture of Tamil and Malayalam. The major themes of these texts were carnal desire, prostitution and so on. Many texts appeared with themes and stories borrowing from the great epics and Puranas, but none of them were composed in the vernacular language, Malayalam. The medieval Kerala society itself was facing a great moral decadence because of the extreme feudal structure, continuous wars between the local kings, superstitious rites and ritual and so on (Pillai 238-240).

Professor Udaya Kumar in his article *Self, Body and Inner Sense: Some Reflections on Sree Narayana Guru and Kumaran Asan* says:

Caste provided the primary grid for differentiation in nineteenth century Kerala. Clothing, jewellery, hairstyle, naming, food – all these constituted an elaborate sign system that had as its basis the system of caste differentiation. The spectacle of the body in public spaces was regulated through a system of distance pollution – the sacredness of the space and purity of the body being dependent on restrictions of access to other bodies in terms of visibility, touch, hearing, and clearly specified distances. (Kumar 248)

Udayakumar points out the idea of ‘pollution’ that prevailed in early Kerala society. This was purely based on caste system. The idea of untouchability cannot be merely

restricted to the idea of ‘touch’; it was extended to the idea of what should be seen or heard in between the upper class and the lower class.

P. Govinda Pillai in his book *The Bhakti Movement: Renaissance or Revivalism* points out that the Bhakti poetic tradition in Kerala began with Cherusseri Namboodiri who lived in the early fifteenth century. Cherusseri’s melodious verses of his *Krishnagatha/ Krishnappattu* in simple Malayalam language brought a poetic beauty of vernacular language for the first time in Kerala. The entire work contains the story of Lord Krishna from the very beginning from his childhood, to adolescence and youth. The magnificent musical composition of *Krishnagatha* in a delighting lullaby meter and the poet’s intense devotion for Lord Krishna makes the text an exceptionally popular Bhakti work (Pillai 239).

Pillai also talks about the Niranam poets of early Malayalam literature who tried to free the language from the bounds of Tamil. History says that two of these poets hail from Niranam in today’s Pathanamthitta district whereas another hails from Vellangallur in present Thrissur district. Bhakti was the common aspect that brought these three poets together under the same title. The Kannassa poets also had parallel intentions. Pillai quotes, “Not only did they part company with the Manipravalam language style, but also its carnal themes to set in motion the Bhakti movement which was brought to its final form by Thunchath Ezhuthachan” (Pillai 239-240).

Some critics remark that Ezhuthachan used the ‘Kilippattu meter’ to compose his poems because of the reason that he was born as a Chakkala Nair to the Sudra community, who was denied of writing scriptural texts, which came under the complete authority of Brahmins (Pillai 241). Ezhuthachan tried to incorporate the principles of Dharma and Bhakti in his text *Adhyatmaramayanam Kilippattu*. He intelligently used several Sanskrit words in his works blending it with Malayalam, which makes

Ezhuthachan a master in the semantic sphere. As per Valmiki's *Ramayana*, Rama is a perfect ruler and a devoted son. But when it comes to Ezhuthachan's text, the character Rama is portrayed as the perfect embodiment of Lord Vishnu. He makes Rama a perfect entity of true devotion and repeats the term Lord Rama again and again in many situations. In short, because of the reason that the 'Kilippattu meter' was largely used in the folk songs of Kerala, Ezhuthachan's works of art can be recognized as a pure product of the folk tradition (Pillai 242-243).

He was followed by Poonthanam Namboodiri (1547-1640), who penned the splendid lyrics: *When the young Krishna is playing in your heart/ why should one have another kid?* (Pillai 246). Even though Poonthanam was a Bhakti poetic follower of Ezhuthachan, his composing style and diction were quite different from that of the elder. He used simple colloquial Malayalam to describe his devotion to the Lord. Even though he was born as a Brahmin, he critiqued the Brahmin supremacy and their customs. He sharply ridicules and mocks the Brahmins for their 'feudal foolishness' of their caste hierarchy and for portraying themselves as the supreme God (Pillai 246-247).

Poonthanam writes:

Some Brahmins, filled to bursting with their rank,

Think Brahma himself not up to their mark.

Some of high caste, greedy for wealth and fame,

Perform the sacred rites only in name. (Nambisan 61)

Arundhati Subramaniam in the Introduction of her book *Eating God: A Book of Bhakti Poetry*, explains how a Bhakta/Devotee is born in a medieval society. According to her findings, the aristocratic language Sanskrit was never suited to all the classes of society, particularly to those spiritual minded people who hailed from the lower strata of the medieval social system. Sanskrit was never found healthy and flexible with their

interpretations of religion and God. Hence, this new medieval group of spiritual section comprised both men and women, irrespective of gender, caste and economic and social status. They include artisans, potters, weavers, basket makers, cobblers, musicians, palanquin bearers, milkmen, priests, tax-collectors, plebeians, boatmen, scholars, pariahs and princesses. They had nothing similar in their characters and lifestyles (xi-xii).

Moreover, they lived during different periods at different geographical regions from east to west and north to south, in the great Indian subcontinent. Arundhati remarks:

They were incendiary dreamers who refused to be mere worshippers, anarchic visionaries who refused to be mere inheritors. They were less god-fearing than god-possessed, less content to receive an ancient wisdom than impatient to express their own tempestuous interiority. It was a strange condition, this bhakti, this unappeasable lust, this clamorous yearning, this greed. (Subramaniam xii)

It is to be noted that Poonthanam is from Brahmin community and his criticism of caste hierarchies should be viewed as a criticism from within. Kerala has seen several such examples in later centuries – the revolutionary life and works of Sri. V. T.

Bhattathirippad is just one example.

Henceforth a true Bhakta/Devotee, with a new social and religious outlook was born. By singing in his/her own vernacular language of the heart, they quickly found a place in the socio-political sphere and became a powerful leader and spokesman of the time. Bhakti poets had the peculiarity of demanding their needs to God through their lyrics. Through their devotional compositions they beautifully sang, grieved, cursed, enjoyed and even celebrated their happiness, joy, love, lust, desires and even their hunger and sorrows.

A.K. Ramanujan in his book *Speaking of Siva*, describes a true devotee as a person who is not content to worship God in a particular word, name or by performing a

specific rite or ritual. Theology should never give any detailed explanation for God. The only thing that matters is that the devotee must possess the Supreme God and vice versa. A perfect devotee can sing songs, compose lyrics, perform dance, paint pictures, build monuments, etc., to embody God in all likely ways that he could (29-30).

To conclude, the relationship between God and the devotee is spiritually intense. God could be supreme, sublime and immortal. Apart from that according to Bhakti poets' God also possess the characters of a family man. Therefore, God can be treated in a way one treats his/her beloved as a member of one's own family. So to communicate with God, they choose local vernacular homely language that speaks from the bottom of the heart, avoiding standardized Sanskrit. Often, their devotion gets mixed with eroticism. The Bhakti fervor got exposed with the use of *Madhurya Bhakti*, *Shringara bhava* or sometimes sexual love and carnal desires. These features contribute to the Bhakti poems making it the richest poetry in the medieval period.

The Bhakti saints continuously revolted against the entire regulations of all institutionalized religions. The kind of spirituality which the Bhakti poets emphasized was based on the divinity of human spirit. This philosophy was quite different from that of the modern thinkers such as Tagore who believed that humans are born as sinners and therefore has to live his whole life in regret. Caste discrimination based on feudal hierarchy seemed to be the most crucial issue of the medieval period. It was never confined to the sphere of socio-religious but broadened into the areas of trade, economics and commerce. The Bhakti poets condemned and criticized the exploitation of peasants and laborers by the feudal powers. Thus they strongly opposed the outlooks and perceptions of medieval feudalism. They strongly believed that the individual can communicate with God or be one with God without the help of any priestly class. Thus,

their attitude can be considered as a protest against the existing social norms which was propagated mainly by the upper classes.

Even though being religious leaders and social reformers, these saints led happy domestic lives with their family. Tulsidas, Namdev, Ravidas and so on are some examples. They earned their daily livelihood without accepting any presentations and charity from their followers or begging. Instead, they worked hard and attempted to raise the quality and dignity of labor. At the same time, the Bhakti saints like Kabirdas or Surdas always kept a fine distance from the ruling class (monarchical power) because of the reason that they criticized and doubted the honesty and generosity of the rulers. They also warned their disciples not to get too connected with the rulers and wealthy people. These instances make clear that the protest of Bhakti leaders were not only limited to the religious issues but also encompassed the socio-political, economical and administrative levels of the society, making many Bhakti saints enter into the sphere of politics.

Chapter 2

Being Woman: Theoretical Speculations on Female Body in

Medieval India

A woman, her physical body, mental psyche and her artistic creativity occupies several great platforms for cultural discussions. The significant question that has always been asked is how a woman's experiences of her physical body shape her literal creativity. Also, there are other frequently asked queries about how a woman exists in a particular cultural context and especially, how she reacts to those cultural events and traditions which impose their conventions and contexts on identities of women. It is important to note that the physical experience of being a woman and her very existence in a society is different from being a man because of her subjugated position in a patriarchal society. Therefore, her engagements and involvements in various artistic activities will be totally different from that of a man. There are different ways in which a woman's physical body acts as conduit for moral and sociopolitical messages. The literary texts produced by women answer to a large range of beliefs and principles that are strictly imposed upon their gender. The diverse genres of literature by women, be it fiction, poetry, drama and so on, often create their own cultural positions.

The British critic and public intellectual Terry Eagleton in his article "Nationalism, Irony and Commitment", mentions that as the Irish are oppressed by not 'considering' them as Irish, women are oppressed by 'considering' them as women (29). The histories of Ireland state that the land itself offers every topographical advantages for its persecutors. In the case of women, it is the existing national, socio-political and cultural traditions and conventions that tend to marginalize or downgrade them regularly on the basis of their bodily differences. Eagleton is of the opinion that female writers

must not “[circumvent] the abstract universal equalizations of exchange value” within nationalism, “in order to turn it against itself” in order to break the chains of those cruel and oppressive conventions that dwell upon creativity (30-31). Creative women may always have a best, true and unique association to their cultural contexts along with the literary genre in which they respond. This chapter is an attempt to explain the significance of a women’s physical body, experiences and responses to the socio-political (patriarchal) and cultural world.

In the Introduction to the book *Women’s Literary Creativity and the Female Body*, Diane Long Hoeveller and Donna Decker Schuster mention that from the very ancient days, women have been widely associated as well as marginalised by their reproductive bodies. Women have always found (or forcefully recognised) their creative outlet by giving birth, raising their children, and therefore celebrating motherhood. Maternity was the highest and ideal form of a woman’s creativity; the Valorization of Virgin Mary with baby Jesus Christ in her arms is an example. Diane Long Hoeveller and Donna Decker Schuster consider Virgin Mary with the child as a cultural icon:

Such an icon has been literally worshipped in Western civilization, while Japanese, Chinese, African, and Indian societies have fostered very much the same sort of iconography and attitudes toward the mother-woman. The historical record makes it clear that there has been a persistent focus on the female body in all attempts to understand women as creative, which has led the female to be seen as the subject of creative efforts by men, rather than the agent of creativity herself. (x-xi)

The idea of portraying female body was always there in all art-forms, irrespective of the geographical locations. Several manifestation of the female body has been portrayed even in Raja Ravi Varma paintings. Such Ravi Varma paintings can be identified not just

as a creative expression that has been influenced by European realisms, but as an attempt that follows a larger tradition of portraying different manifestations of female body.

Gender, especially woman has become significant in the medieval writings. Women started to write about their own physical body and sexuality. Body became their tool of expression, resistance and revolution. Her feminine body influenced her sense of self, especially her socio-political image and identity. The medieval ages were the period when society gradually established itself as patriarchal and masculine by controlling every sphere of a woman's presence. The religious books of Hinduism such as *Manusmriti* and their sacred laws encouraged this subordination of women. Religion has great influence upon the lives of medieval people, and they were encouraged to follow certain rules and regulations put forward by the religion. Women under the patriarchal spell of religion were always subordinated. According to an ardent devotee, her emotional feelings are more significant to her than her religious scholarship, ritualistic ways, authority, power and so on. To become a keen devotee, a person should discard the senses of authority or dictatorship. The patriarchal ideologies and gender egos must be strictly discarded. She should surrender herself to the lord. Several female Bhakti saints to an extent could break the chains of patriarchy. Their lyrics are great examples for this. This is evident while we analyse the songs of Mirbai. She happily submits herself to her Lord Giridhar (she calls Lord Krishna by the name 'Giridhar') by singing and dancing for him in ultimate adulterous passion. Unfortunately she was born as a medieval woman – a Rajput princess. Here, it is noticed that saint poets such as Narsi Mehta, Bulle Shah, Chokhamela, Surdas, Kabirdas, et al. poets ranging from diverse spiritual convictions, provinces, social groups, clans and circumstances tended to use generously the romantic verses and idioms to exhibit their own spiritual feelings as well

as philosophies and finally discarded the separation felt between one's intellect and his/her emotion. Jasbir Jain, in the book *Indigenous Roots of Feminism: Culture Subjectivity and Agency* explains that:

Looking at the devotional hymns of men is of importance in order to comprehend the impact and significance of this movement which was subversive of a great deal of elitist, codified value structure and which sought to place god–man relationships on a different footing altogether. It was a native upsurge addressing its own social concerns frontally. (Jain 127)

Jain points out the significance of Bhakti poets and the significance of re-reading them in a contemporary socio-cultural scenario where caste and class is still an issue. Through problematizing the works of Bhakti literature, critics like Jasbir Jain observes that it is a fine tuned documentation of the medieval terms where the society was ruled by several hierarchical structures. They tried to reduce divine elements of worship and bring God and place him closer to human heart and emotions. A best example is that of fourteenth century saint poet Kabirdas, who was significantly admired by Guru Nanak and whose verses are also incorporated in *Guru Granth Sahib*, the holy book of Sikhs. He penned numerous sensuous verses that question the existing hierarchical models of the society. Those poems directly mirrored Sufi philosophies and thoughts as well and are deeply secularist in its essence. Quite often, the supreme God is interpreted as a mere earthly lover.

The principal idea of Bhakti movement was to build an intimate relationship between heavenly God and the earthly devotee and thus bring God closer to humans. Thus, worshipping God naturally becomes an individual act of devotion without the presence of any mediator such as a priest or husband. God himself becomes an eternal lover. This technique consequently crossed the conventional barriers and widened the

ideas of agency and freedom. It radically converted the self-images of the harassed, oppressed females and the lower class people. It further moved into the everyday spoken idioms, dialects and the vernacular languages of common people including art forms such as dance and music. Producing sounds to sing hymns and chanting mantras were significant characteristics of these mass movements which aroused the power of emotional feeling. The Sikh holy book, *Guru Granth Sahib*, is the direct product of development of the Bhakti Movement, and is exclusively grounded on classical ragas. In another sense, it was a traveling movement that continuously travelled from one place to the other over many years and centuries, approximately from the early sixth century to nearly nineteenth century. The followers of the movement traveled from place to place in the forms of long unending pilgrimages. The Bhakti leaders such as Surdas, Namdev and Guru Nanak travelled extensively aiming at spreading their message to large masses and refusing fixities of every kind. According to these saints, their Gods too travelled with them. In most of the cases, these Gods never confined to temples, but wandered along with their ardent devotees. Their philosophies and ideas travelled and wandered along with them as the revolutionary rudiments that exposed the emptiness of life-denying configurations.

In the Preface to the book *Faces of the Feminine in Ancient, Medieval and Modern India*, editor Mandakranta Bose points out that:

Devotional Hinduism swept through India, taking root as an ideology that offered an irresistible alternative to the common individual, at least in the spiritual context. It gave space to people on the margin, such as women, lower castes, and outcastes. Women, powerless and silent in many domains of community life, found strength in their sense of the divine and their own voice in poetry and songs. (ix)

The earliest recorded poetry by women in India—*Therigathas*, the poems of Buddhist nuns (6th BC)—are the best examples of women expressing their joy at finding happiness and freedom from the toils of domestic life and achieving spiritual liberation. The images, symbols and metaphors used by the medieval Bhakti poets are moreover romantic, sensuous, worldly as well as physical.

A.K. Ramanujan, in his article “Talking to God in the Mother Tongue” has prepared a remarkably perfect summing up of the various drifts in Bhakti Movement in the Karnataka region. He has also, using a flow chart, recounted the numerous methods by which some of these female saints dealt with their bodily sexuality and domestic margins. Their husbands, mothers-in-laws, children, etc., all had to be dealt with. The legend says that Akka Mahadevi, a Kannada Virasaiva poet, was wedded to a chieftain. She had asked her spouse not to physically touch her, and if he violated her, then she will soon leave him. Later, this happened and she walked out on him naked, dropping off her clothes and went in quest of parallel devotees. Men are placed by her only in asexual relationships such as father and brother. The idea of cuckolding her husband through a relationship with God, the lover, is acceptable to her (Jain 132). In one of her verses translated by A. K. Ramanujan in his *Speaking of Siva*, she plans to give the slip to her sister-in-law and says:

And I cannot cross the sister-in-law.

But I will

give the wench the slip

and go cuckold my husband with Hara, my Lord. (Ramanujan 141)

In other verse she expresses her inner struggle:

Husband inside,

Lover outside,

I can't manage them both.
 This world and that other,
 cannot manage them both.
 O Lord white as jasmine
 I cannot hold in one hand
 both the round nut
 and the long bow. (Ramanujan 127)

Here, the devotee might be continuously struggling with his own internal desire, and for whom “any contact with the other gender would be a distraction” (Ramaswamy 151).

The Veerasaiva movement, from the name itself is evidently clear that it is directed towards the strong devotion of Lord Shiva as a contradiction to the Vaishnava section praised by Andal of Tamil Nadu or Mirabai of Rajasthan. Therefore, the phallic symbol of linga (Sivalinga) is worshiped in profound devoutness and looks upon Lord Shiva as a perpetual male bridegroom. Even today, many Hindu women worship Shivalinga and observe fasting on every Monday (Mondays are treated as the days of Lord Shiva) and pray to Lord for worthy husband and a happy married life. This example accounts to the legendary episode of Parvathi, the Himalayan princess, worshipping Lord Shiva to get married to him.

Lord Shiva is considered as both the creator as well as the destroyer. He is known for his *thandava* form of dance – the dance of massive destruction. Female protests inside the Veerasaiva movement never tried to dislocate or substitute the linga form with any other form of iconic representation. As a substitute, men and women together observed Lord Śhiva as the eternal companion, submitting themselves to the Lord and shifting the obligation of lordship from urbane outlines to holy domains. The Linga-dharma likewise resulted to substitute the initiation rights of Brahmins.

The consciousness and achievement of gender equality was an unusual event in Bhakti Movement. Even in the monastic missions and in the religious resistance movements including Buddhism, that intentionally interrogated the medieval caste hierarchies, gender pyramids continued, and therefore it was very natural to retain females as domestic heroines and thereby totally eliminate them from their opportunity to enter asceticism and attain salvation. The female body and its nudity always stood as a strong threat to men regardless of the condition whether they were sadhus or hermits. In accordance to the straight violation of these existing social taboos strictly executed by conventional religions, female saints always inquired whether devoutness is either male or female. Nevertheless whether one distinguishes this or not, or is unwilling to admit the fact, gender obviously becomes a puzzling feature and communal preconceptions continue. Still under these rigid social situations, if a female devotee comes out of her home by denying the social prejudices, norms and restrictions, others must accept and acknowledge her courage and the underlying strength of her deep faith in her God. Females have always been targeted, branded as whores or prostitutes, narrowed within their households and penalized in many other means for being brave and daring to step outdoor of the male distinct space.

Here lies the question of how women saints enlarged their individual space and how they transcended their physical body. There are several implications accounting to it by rising above body, disregarding body, or rejecting to recognise and accept body or via discovering alternate ways of survival and sublimating human physical desire. In the book *The Collected Essays of A. K. Ramanujan*, the flowchart drawn by Ramanujan enlists certain approaches adopted by female saints (272-273). This list includes rejecting marriage with a mortal being, living a courtesan lifestyle, astonishingly skipping the youth days using absolute determination, trust and belief throughout their

young days by means of their physical splendor and sexuality, or by walking away from marriage, even by converting as a male or an aged unpleasant woman, rejecting the barriers of widowhood, denying maternity, marrying a sacred God, walking out in nudity, or even by consciously violating caste barriers (274-275). The above mentioned points are those listed by Ramanujan after examining the lives of female saints. The male followers never need to confront any of these difficulties and therefore they never have to resort to any such tactics of bypassing their gender.

The two Jain sects—Digambars and the Svetambars distinguished themselves on the basis of nudity of their physical body. Also, it was on the same actual basis once more that the feminine body was distinguished against, for the reason that the female nudity was recognized as totally unlike from that of a man. Akka Mahadevi stretched it to every women saint by truly performing it in her real life and later becoming totally unconscious and unconcerned of her own physicality, consequently transcending the physical body in its total sum.

Theoretically, the devotee rejects the division between domestic life and the one of renunciation. Where the women devotees are concerned, there happens some exceptions in accordance to the patriarchal forms of power. Whereas, at several other cases, possibly a usual hatred to the sexual act and hence Bhakti facilitated them to select an alternate option. Here, there exists two different and exciting phases of resistance chosen by female devotees and one must certainly pay attention to their verses. First is that religion was not a necessary aspect to restrict one's life or one that deprived of his/her completeness. For example, the Tamil Sangam poet Avvai (Avvaiyar), as she is more popularly referred to, joined in secular political life. Second, according to married women, even the idea of cuckolding her spouse using a deep emotional relationship turned acceptable. Karaikal Ammaiyar, an ancient South Indian

Tamil saint poet, converted her physical sexuality by achieving a tremendous power that could even horrify the men present around her. In Karaikkal Ammaiyar's new appearance that rejects her body and sexuality, she herself becomes unchanged and so no man will possess the courage to come anywhere near her vision and therefore she gradually becomes a feminine ascetic par excellence. It is associated with creative power and remarks that Karaikal Ammaiyar is characterized similar to a Kali like figure and hence she occupies the 'preta' realm (ghost like domain) in the burial ground. Therefore her ultimate liberation or deliverance lies at Lord Shiva's feet.

The same body and physical desire get discussed with Muddupalani's work. It's a crucial question where we should place the Thanjaore poet Muddupalani and her text *Radhika Santwanam* (Appeasing Radhika). It stands halfway in the middle of devotion (Bhakti) and human sexuality. Muddupalani is believed to be the first woman poet who wrote an erotic verse. Her work *Radhika Santwanam* (Appeasing Radha) helped in strengthening female's subjectivity and subjecthood that easily paved way for a change from the complete submission to one's Lord into a further cognizant setting inside a social construction and also in the authentic involvement of one's bodily desires. In the Introduction to the book *Women Writing in India*, Susie Tharu and K. Lalita have remarked a healthy description about the book and the controversies that it faced at the time of reprinting the same by Bangalore Nagaratamma in British India (1910). The entire narrative poem was well knotted in love and thus the principle mood was *sringara rasa*. The entire text foregrounded on a woman's sensuality (Radha) instead that of a man's (Krishna). The medieval society was not ready to accept erotic love of Radha-Krishna over the platonic love they found in Krishna fables and tales. Muddupalani was an eighteenth-century poet, and Nagaratamma, of twentieth century who reprinted it, was a courtesan and both these women were associated with the basis of aesthetics. The

publication of the book was strictly prohibited by the British government and the already published copies were destroyed. The reason behind these mass protests is that they found the book obscene. Thus the debatable query was what converts something from eroticism to obscenity.

The nationalist leaders used the image of Kali to represent inspirational martyrdom, the revolutionaries used for expressing ferocity, strength and violence whereas the imperialists used the same image to criticize India and the pan-Indian culture and thereby set it back into ancient or primitive eras. Kali arose to express the horrifying, dark yet also peculiarly seductive as well as enthralling supremacies of the Orient. She fashioned a crucial portion of the wider scheme of 'Imagining India' as an 'Other of the West'. The pan-Indian culture, religious notions, its ideologies, beliefs, fancies and imagination widely used the Kali image to stimulate nationalist enthusiasm, passion, fervor or commitment. However in an effort to tame her feminine sexuality she too was locked up in the motherhood image of nourishment, shelter and protection.

The Victorian prudishness had by this period (1910) occupied its clutches on Indian culture, that was much more liberal about the Radha–Krishna love. By this time, the British colonial authorities had initiated to interfere not only in the writings of political matters including that of Gandhi's or Ambedkar's, but also were genuinely involved in the charge of reformation of gender. Here then this particular element must be taken into memory.

The theme of agency, freedom and sexuality of woman in India gets associated with the images of Kali, a double faced goddess with a drastic physical appearance and attires. At the same time she is a benevolent protector who is powerfully capable of vengeance and unkindness. Hence, the image of Kali naturally induces awe and fear in the mind of devotees. She is portrayed as a blood-thirsty vindictive female deity and a

war goddess. It significant how she herself becomes the determining factor and the destruction of the demon Mahishasura. Yet again, the powerful image of the female naked body itself becomes a very tough constituent which rounds through spiritual, secular and political Indian writings including Vyasa's epic *Mahabharata* till Mahasweta Devi's *Draupadi* and thus openly expressing the female sexuality. Contrary to these arguments, the concealed physical body, modest and passive is an image fashioned by the social culture only for the shield and protection of males. The sexuality of a woman is considered as a threat or a trap; therefore it must be controlled, suppressed and tamed.

It is found that numerous sects of divine worship in the Indian subcontinent echoes the Rig Veda's hymns of mobile desire of physical body. All the significant spiritual movements that developed in medieval India to pay homage to both Lord Shiva (Saivism) and Lord Vishnu including his incarnations such as Rama and Krishna (Vaishnavism) from the 5th Century A.D till 19th Century A.D highlighted the requirement to detach oneself from his masculine power so as to experience the erotic pleasure. After a thorough analysis of the Bhakti poetry written in India during the medieval eras, the erotic sensual love of Lord Krishna is narrated in detail from the point of view of a female, particularly even by the major male poets. Madhavi Menon in her book *A History of Desire in India* writes:

Masculinity in Bhakti poetry recasts itself in the mould of the feminine in order to fully embrace what it is like to worship the god of multiple desires. In the history of his worship, Krishna assumes several different shapes, and so do his devotees. The very form of this Bhakti poetry is transsexual—men become women in order to worship a man, and have to live the erotic experience of being women in order to be able to write their poetry. (Menon 162)

Several Bhakti poets had observed this peculiar state of ecstasy where they themselves come into an erotic pleasure with their Lord Krishna. Here, what indirectly happens is that femininity naturally becomes a form of erotic delight which is to be experienced with Krishna, the boundless lover of gopis. This peculiar condition which is a firm statement frequently repeated by numerous poets of Bhakti movement stresses to hold into the state of being feminine. Such a movement is problematic because the state of adoration is inevitably conflated with being a woman, while the adored is a man (Menon 166). However, it is quite significant that it is certainly the male devotee who transfers from being male to female. And this transformation from male to female enriches instead of reducing his pleasure.

According to Rig Veda, desire exists everywhere. It existed in the very beginning of the universe and continues till date. Madhavi Menon further explains about desire:

Desire is the all in all, that without which nothing can be. But it is also nowhere because no one source for it can be identified. It cannot be reduced to being the product of one body or another. It is within this universe that we see a multitude of desiring positions undercutting the central importance of castration anxiety. Desire might take on the local shape of man and woman. But male and female are not the primary nodes through which desire exists in the universe. Instead, desire is inchoate, which means it is not limited to or defined by gendered bodies and roles. (Menon 162)

When we look outside of the Bhakti customs that are dedicated to Vishnu or Shiva and their numerous incarnations, the erotic interchangeability of physical bodies was the ongoing customary practice in both spiritual and in lyrical verses. Such a rich multiplicity becomes an apparent extension of the Hindu faiths in multiple gods as well as goddesses. There lies also the association concerning erotic desire and the status of

physical body. Poets such as Bulleh Shah or Ksetrayya never change their physical bodies with the intention of becoming females. Instead, they assume that they are females and hence declare their personal desires. Several Gods and poets alter their physical gender from masculine to feminine and their devotees follow the same.

Sree Narayana Guru, Kerala's significant social renaissance leader-sage of twentieth century, explains body in its associations with caste and autonomy. His disciple, Kumaran Asan, a noteworthy Malayalam poet, described in his poetry an explanation of the concept of interiority, making it the suitable locus of individuated sensual craving as well as the turn of self-transformation. When the works of both these reformers are analyzed, it may throw some light on the intricate connections among austerity and physical yearning that trigger the structure of contemporary subjectivity.

Narayana Guru's poems portray the combination of various cultures and traditions. Even though he was observed as an *advaitin*, he was also attracted to the Tamil *Siddhars* and *Saiva Sidhanta*. His works reveal the impacts of *yogasastra*. The stories, legends and tales that explain the life and incidents of Narayana Guru show his familiarity with yoga and *Siddhavaidyam*.

Professor Udayakumar, describes Sree Narayana Guru's Siddha tradition in his essay, *Self, body, inner sense: Some reflections on Sree Narayana Guru and Kumaran Asan*. He explains:

The influence of these traditions, especially those of the Tamil *siddhars*, on Sree Narayana has not been adequately understood. Sree Narayana's poems are resonant with allusions to this tradition, and commentators have traced the strong presence of Pattinattar behind many of his verses. One of Sree Narayana's devotional compositions, *Kundalinippattu*, has clearly been along the lines of the work of Pampatti *siddhar*. Each stanza in *Kundalinippattu* ends with the refrain,

‘Dance, Snake! Dance!’ as in Pampatti *siddhar*’s work. Even Sree Narayana’s most popular slogan ‘One caste, one religion, one God for man’ resonates with the presence of lines from Tirumular’s *Tirumantiram*: ‘One caste, one God.... (251)

The repeated mentioning of *siddhars* in the works of Guru is not by chance. The Tamil *siddhars* possessed an extensive tradition of their constant fights against caste hegemony. Czech literary scholar Kamil Vaclav Zvelebil comments that, the Tamil *siddhars* are never a secluded team or unique body of numerous independent scholars, but is a very significant segment of a broad tradition, healthily spread in every phase and space of medieval years of South India – the moving practice of *siddhars*, who belonged to the groups of tantric or yogic Indian culture (Kumar 251-252)

These *siddhar* customs have many contrasts with medieval Bhakti tradition. According to Udaya Kumar, their practices of idol worship, ethical conducts, yoga culture, stress on knowledge and definite manners to fervent devoutness to an ‘ishtadevata’, differentiate them from the Bhakti cults. *Jnanam* and *Arivu* are the two significant terms for wisdom that are frequently used in the works of Sree Narayana Guru. Generally, *Arivu* dwells in the physical place for Brahmins. It is considered as the very crucial reality. The whole surrounding world as well as the living realities here is recognised as brief instances in the introspective measure of *Arivu*. Guru created alternative idols like mirrors, stones and lamps that could be analyzed in various accounts against the idolatrous custom of the Tamil *siddha* convention. The influence of *siddhars* on the daily life customs is evidently observed in Sree Narayana Guru’s doctrines and other associated works. *Tirumantiram*, written by ancient Tamil Saivite mystic and writer Tirumular, is considered as the initial foundation for the Saiva

siddhanta tradition. He is also considered as the first Tamil Siddha. Moreover, there also exists a strong belief regarding his lineage associating to the Kashmir valleys.

The Tamil Siddha tradition treated *uyir* (life-force) as something that cannot be present devoid of *utal* (body). Tirumular believed the human physical body and its upkeep to be the fundamentals regarding any kind of mystical practice. For him, the physical body is God's sacred shrine and hence the protection and maintenance of a man's body with boundless care and affection becomes the fresh task for a rational follower. According to Tirumular, scorning the physical body develops into an unsound action when he learns about the *porul* within *utal*. In one of his verse, Tirumular describes the human heart as the shrine and human body as the house (Kumar 252).

Two noteworthy early works of Sree Narayana Guru namely, *Mananattheetham* and *Siva Satakam* request God Shiva to liberate his devotee from his strong temptations concerning body (flesh). In his text *Siva Satakam*, the female is the chief character that exemplifies the fallen status of the physical body. The physical body of a woman ultimately becomes a spot of stink, as the deep oceans are entirely emptied and then occupied with stench water. The female breasts are at times associated with cysts, and the whole life along with the female is compared to the infernal ocean occupied wholly with blood and pus. *Mananattheetham* wavers among the two binary extremes of terror and attraction with an extreme sense of earnestness and anxiety. Here, the feminine character is an active tempting conqueror where the disciple is totally stranded deprived of the grace and support of Lord Shiva. And the soul is associated with a bird who is caught in Kamadeva's snare set. It is death and insanity that is constantly haunting the existence of the female. The feminine body is treated as a corpse, and the female discloses herself as wild and outrageous in the core of passionate hugs. The fear and anxiety of the woman combines along with the fright of death and dependence. In these

works, the senses of the physical body is unaware of what they can rejoice and what their authentic sphere could be. They continuously specify the immediacy of man's demise and the immoral ploy of dependence. Udayakumar states, "To change from this sense of fallenness and shame, of *jugupsa*, the senses need to be reinscribed in a new relation to the body and the self" (253).

Another notable poem of Sree Narayana Guru, *Indriya Vairagyam*, explains that even the problem or its answer never lies in the senses. The senses never possess any kind of pains. It is the human self which becomes the locus of miseries and grief. Udaya Kumar states that "The devotee sees his body as being abused by the senses-the latter are seen as inferior beings involved without respite in the sensible world" (Kumar 253). Each time, the prayer to God Shiva is in the formula of a request to rescue the disciple from falsehood; thereby he can hold the fresh and virtuous body. This option of a pure physical body and its upkeep joins Sree Narayana Guru's texts to the sacralization and preservation of the delicate body in yoga.

Guru's elaborate work *Atmopadesa Satakam* is also provided with various instances derived from *Saiva Siddhanta* and also from the practices of the Tamil *siddhars*. The whole work is written in the form of advice. The importance specified to Arivu as the exhibition of God and the placing of the senses (*indriyam*), inner sense (*karanam*) and body (*kalebaram*) and the world (*jagat*) as its manifestations already pick up many of the constituents from these backgrounds. The sense about one's self (*Ahanta*) is regarded as something that encompasses human skin, skeleton, excreta and other unpredictable internal views or thoughts (*anthakalakal*). Still, *Ahanta* is the crucial instance for the distinction of Arivu. Udayakumar points out:

The ambivalence of the text towards the body is expressed in detail in verses 8 and 9 of the Satakam. Verse 8 describes the body as a foul-smelling tube on

which tantalizingly play the five birds of the senses, feeding on the five objects of the senses. The verse, however, ends with another, contrasting image of the body-that of a body of light or *velivuru*. This new body annihilates the birds of the senses, and can be rightly inhabited by the soul. The juxtaposition of these two bodies, one the subject of the self-practice and the other the object, is made possible by the availability of the distinction between *sthula sarira* (gross body) and *sukshma sarira* (subtle body). This makes possible a re-presentation of the body inscribed in terms of the yogic tradition. Verse 9 presents the image of a sage meditating under a tree, on the two sides of which climbs a creeper bearing six blossoms. The image of the tree is a *yogasastric* figuration of the body, with the two sides of the creeper: being *ida* and *pingala*, and the six flowers suggesting the six stages (*muladhara*, *swadhishtana*, *manipuraka*, *anahata*, *visuddhi* and *ajna*) in the ascent of the *kundalini* towards its final destination of enlightenment, *sahasrara*. (255)

Human physical body is a strong indicator which exposes the base of an accurate distinction. In short, Guru tries to explain that it is never the *jati* (caste) that results or establish the exact semiology of distinction, it is the human body itself. The physical body is not just a carrier of numerous signs; it could be a sign in its own right. Hence, caste markers obscure the accurate implication of the human body, not simply by rendering redundant symbols, but by assuming the semiological purpose to themselves. By constantly repeating, ‘Caste should go; there is no other way. All human beings belong to the same community’, Sree Narayana Guru is emphasizing the disapproval between true and false distinction of the body of humankind. He also asserted on the difference between religion (*matham*) and community (*samudayam*). According to him, it is immoral to put the subjects of the community inferior to religion or the religious

subjects inferior to the community. There must not be any association between communal activities and their religion. For him, religion is a complete material of human minds.

The true depiction of a feminine physical body in the verses of Kumaran Asan, the major disciple of Sree Narayana Guru, is different than other Malayalam poets. He tried to interpret the feminine body via a different channel than his contemporaries. He rarely explained his early poetical heroines Nalini and Leela in terms of their physical beauty. However for his later heroines like Seetha or Mathangi, their bodily portrayal barely permits any lingering on their physical body as a matter of physical desire or attraction. Breasts, which were very typical matters of lingering delight in the poetical times of Kumaran Asan, scarcely find any reference in the works of Asan. *Karuna*, his last work is the only text where he portrays his heroine in accounts that specify sensual attractions. Udayakumar quotes, “However, the reader recognizes soon that this description is inscribed in terms of a mechanism of repetition, where the same parts of the body will reappear at the close of the poem, bleeding and fragmented, to underline the finitude of the body” (263).

Here, desire may or may not identify itself as physical. Physical desire creates a platform or a distinctive occasion of the carnal desire. The subject of bodily desire for the desiring matter is not actually the body of the other, nor even the physical desire for the other, but a desire acknowledged by the other’s soul. Asan’s verses prove that desire can happen only between a male and a female and hence it may depend upon the classification of every human being into either man or woman, where the distinction of physical body naturally becomes the chief icon. Behind this, there lies a natural law of distinction and desire. Narayana Guru, as mentioned above, constantly disputed in contrary to the wrong distinction of natural kinds, and at times accepted a correct

distinction inside the humankind, a kind of normal distinction, between the masculine gender and the feminine gender. As the physical body becomes the major icon of this inevitable variance, physical desire becomes the chief symbol of a desire which is eventually stranded as the desire of the soul. A model for the soul's desire, the rationality and vibrancy which it outdoes, the deep passions that it articulates, relishes and agonizes continue to get entrenched in a treatise of physical desire. When Nalini dies on Divakaran's chest, even the desire of the soul discovers its completion in the complete parting from physical desire and resounds with the delight of fleshly union. Here, there exists an extreme bodily craving for physical desire, which finds its assertion in human body. The physical body appears to establish a perimeter to the carnal intensity of desire. At a particular time, when this perimeter gets acknowledged, the desire naturally vacates the physical body and accepts the human soul as its next habitus. This is how desire gets recognized itself.

Sree Narayana Guru's texts, both as theoretical and as prescriptive, constitute a relocation of the human body from those societal barriers including caste indicators and hence work as a ground for the actual distinction permitting to natural laws. Whereas, Kumaran Asan produced an advance transformation of those essential fundamentals that he attained from his mentor, Sree Narayana Guru, and to Sree Narayana Guru's usage of features from traditions. The 'natural' basis of distinction not seen in the functioning of human body, but in the sense of a physical, sensual desire. This sensual desire moves further away from the body and discovers in the inner sense the proper location of its advanced strengths.

Nivedita Menon in her book *Seeing Like a Feminist* talks about the Bhakti poets of medieval India within the aspects of body and desire. The social movement initially originated in the Southern parts of India, particularly in the Tamil region around fifth or

sixth century and later spread to the whole nation. The female mystic poets of Bhakti tradition expressed a kind of carnal desire towards their supreme deities that passes over their physical bodies and later reconfigures the same. What they desired was to achieve the defeat of masculinity as dominant power and the defeat of femininity as sexualized flawless (57-58). Kannada poet A. K. Ramanujan comments that the outlines drawn in between man and woman are constantly traversed in the mystic lifestyle of these Bhakti poets. They reinterpreted the physical body and human sexuality by breaking all the rules and regulations that governs the physical body. These spiritual poetic saints turned away from sexuality in the physical world. It was not because of fright, distress or disgust of sexuality, but for the reason that their sensual desire was intensely aimed wholly at a spiritual approach, to their selected deity (58).

Ramanujan points out that when Akka Mahadevi of Karnataka and Lal Ded of Kashmir valleys threw away their bodily attires and jewels, they were making the general public to view the 'modesty' that was invested in hiding the physical body with garments. This was a brilliant technique of fighting against as well as enhancing sexual inquisitiveness, not of controlling it (Menon 58). Akka wote:

You can confiscate
 money in hand
 can you confiscate
 the body's glory?
 Or peel away every strip
 you wear,
 but can you peel
 the Nothing, the Nakedness
 that covers and veils? (Ramanujan 120)

Akka Mahadevi points out that it is easy to take away the material glories from a being, but nobody can steal from you the essence of the being. Her thought transcends the material world and talks about ‘the nothing’ which she considers the ultimate meaning of the world. Jasbir Jain points out that:

In view of the continuously present resistance movements in Indian culture such as Buddhism, Jainism, Sufism, the Bhakti Movement and Sikhism, it is a mistake to construct Indian culture dominantly through Hindu culture, *shruti*, *smritis* and reform movements, especially when we wish to trace the histories of resistance, the relationship of the individual—whether man or woman—to social institutions. (15)

By the continuously rigid and untiring marginalization, people lean towards constructing solid concepts of culture along with that of harassment and fall prey to the belief that inactiveness or repudiation shapes the chief features of our culture where sacrificial principles always possessed control.

The Indian Upanishads further exclude women in several stages. Texts such as *Manusmriti* further stress these discriminations and exclusions. The customs and rituals that exclude females are related to their physical body especially because of menstruation and act of motherhood. Both these acts make the female body ‘impure’ or ‘contaminated’. In addition to that, female body is more seductive as well as vulnerable. All other activities later rooted upon these major exclusions which were directed not only at their body but also formed a platform for other societal and mental discrimination. It is a power strategy and is contrary to the belief that there is nothing pure or impure in itself and that all life has emanated from self-division and dismemberment (Jain 16). Anand Sadashiv Altekar in *The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization* has briefly mentioned about how participation of a female in Vedic

sacrifices had weakened steadily and later on how males arose to substitute these vacuum spaces for women in traditional customs. Moreover, the system of child marriage in India again marginalized women as it denied their right for progressive education. The evil practices such as jauhar, sati, restrictions on widow marriages, etc., again ostracized them.

The long accounts of human life goes on unfolding a repetition of major themes like boons, curses, reward, punishment, repentance, exile/banishment, austerity, existence of karma along one's birth and death and self-generation of an 'other' control or power. A hierarchical set up was later formed by creating woman as a 'sexual' other from the males. Gender equality was a term unaware to the Vedic periods where customs and rituals controlled the human culture and other communal practices such as weddings, castes and religions started to form stronger platforms. Jain explains how Upanishads and Vedic texts dealt with these circumstances:

There is a gap between the Upanisads, which advise restraint and spiritual life, and the epics and other religious narratives which depict a more equal, free and dialogic life, but the gap between the ideal person and the 'ideal' woman come into being as a result of the hardening of rituals which gradually went on closing options, choices and alternatives such as we find in the oral tradition. Women such as Draupadi are further trapped in clan histories of revenge and war. (21)

In India, the mythical characters from ancient classic texts such as Sita, Draupadi and Damayanti were the initial figures in constructing gender. The Agnipariksha faced by Sitadevi, Draupadi's chirharan and faithfulness and loyalty to the pativrata code by Damayanti are some of its examples. From these statements, the two legends, both *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* and their other alternatives and retellings gather significance. These epics not only portray females in their pivotal roles of submission,

purity, obedience, etc., but also portray s men in their strong masculine roles. Rama in *Ramayana* is depicted as 'Utthamapurasha' as well as apart from Krishna, other than the cousin rivals, all the male characters beginning from Bhishma to Abhimanyu gather enough significance in *Mahabharata*. Human gender is fashioned using the chemistry of both femininity as well as masculinity. The reinterpretations and retelling of these epics have later paved way for a swing in the process of reading these legends from different point of views, especially from feminist outlooks. The entire narrative shifts into the outlook of a woman and her physical body. The female psychology is thus revealed and therefore here, woman along with her mental state and physical body becomes both a victim and a survivor. The way of their resistance is celebrated and glorified. Jain explains:

Further, the manner in which retellings have altered them is equally relevant, for the change marks either a resistance or a shift in the social perception of the role, or it may even signify a shift of focus because of social location (caste or class) of the narrator/narrators. Modern interpretations like Pratibha Ray's *Yajnaseni* and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* or Saoli Mitra's play, *Five Lords, Yet None a Protector*, are attempts at psychoanalyses, social criticism and deconstruction. (29)

Furthur, in *Mahabharata*, Draupadi is portrayed as someone different from that of Gandhari or Kunthi. In the Swayamvara segment she ultimately waits for the arrival of the Pandavas, especially Arjuna. At the same time, Karna, the king of Anga was humiliated in public as everyone questions his societal caste which they consider inferior. Even though Karna was as equally brilliant as Arjuna he was cautiously forbidden to enter into the segment. But, the Pandavas, including Arjuna, were nowhere in the *swayamvara* picture. They are believed to have been killed in the fire at

Varanavrata. All the way through this contest, hoping against hope for Arjuna to appear and win, Draupadi intellectually repels the notion of marrying anyone else. She even asks her brother Drishtadyumna whether these wedding proceedings can be stopped for once, which directly indicates her way of resistance. There, Draupadi is portrayed as a woman who is evidently aware about her romantic concepts, sexual desire and bodily pleasures. Moreover, the entire *Mahabharata* celebrates Draupadi as a wife rather than Draupadi as a mother whereas Gandhari or Kunthi is more celebrated for their motherhood. Each of the five Pandavas has his own expectations and desires from Draupadi. The epic also depicts an unconditional loving relationship between Draupadi and Krishna which is explained under the term of 'sakha'.

Mahasweta Devi reinterpreted the character of Draupadi in her short story *Draupadi* which looks up into the chiriharan episode. She shifts the whole narrative into the scene of literally a rape and the following police atrocities of present-day society. Dopdi Mejhen, a Santhal tribal lady is caught. Mejhan and her husband are part of the ongoing Naxalite movement, which aims for the social and economic equality. She was widowed and on one of her missions she was caught, brutally gang raped and was brought in front of the police officers. The officers hope that at least at this dreadful situation, she will reveal the names of other comrades associated with their Naxalite agitation. There are several other crucial segments present in the story but what matters to the readers here, is her aggregate reversal of the disrobing motif. She strongly refuses to be robed by them and then exhibits her bare naked body for the men to get ashamed of themselves. Similar to the mythical character Draupadi of the *Mahabharata*, Dodpi Mejhan used both her inner mind along with her physical body as strong weapons of encounter and therefore extremely criticizing the age old masculine and hegemonic

structure of norms and values that establishes itself in numerous means. Her mental and physical resistance was through her nakedness. Mahaswetha Devi wrote:

Draupadi stands before him, naked. Thigh and pubic hair matted with dry blood. Two breasts two wounds. She mocks him and shakes with an 'indomitable laughter'. Her lips bleed as she begins laughing, Draupadi wipes the blood on her palm and says in a voice that is as terrifying, sky splitting and sharp as her ululation. What's the use of clothes? You can strip me, but how can you clothe me again? Are you a man? (108-109)

Romance has a foremost part in almost all the main sub narratives of *Ramayana* and consequently it defines the foundation of succeeding spousal devoutness. It is very apparent that a person's physical beauty and charmness, his/her way of love-making and the bodily sexual desire play a significant character in every marital relations. American Indologist, Philip Lutgendorf, in his article *The Secret Life of Ramchandra of Ayodhya*, explains these features and evidently comments out that Ram 'rasiks' (one who savors rasa in itself describes artistic pleasure and delight in Natyasastra) mentioned certain tranquil phases in Rama's life span and further used it in the performativity style. It concentrated on that calm and peaceful period of Rama and Sita where the newly wedded couples enjoyed a cheerful life amidst the splendid eases of Ayodhya. According to Lutgendorf a devotee always believed that God has two faces - one earthly face and the other, a transcendental face. Further than these conventional actions, there is a secret face 'in which the quality of erotic attractiveness or madhurya predominates and in which Ram expresses his ultimate reality' (220). Jain says:

Romance and eroticism are natural physical desires even as they help the patriarchal construction of power, control and supremacy, especially through the different kinds of morality being applied to men and women as well as to the

public domain of the moral and immoral. The surfacing of self-interest and rationality shifts the romantic base. (55)

A significant feature noticed here is the excellence of whole surrender and then the unification with the lover, where in this case, is the devotee's favorite God. In the case of a female, the romantic impulse may work negatively. The conventional customs such as the Pativrata concept, a woman's love, sacrificing her life for the other, etc., had not only been assumed during several historical periods as the major suitable roles for medieval women, but also became the ideal replicas for expressing their heroism as exhibited in those medieval rituals such as Sati or jauhar. The story of queen Padmavati gains significance in this circumstance. Padmavati, along with several women in the court performed the ritual of jauhar and later this story has been romanticized as a brave action by the women to protect their chastity. The pain and sufferings these women underwent has been valourised in the later narratives.

When one looks into the accounts of human history across ages encircling almost all cultures in globe, human romance has operated as a tempting principle for the feminine subservience. The salient imagery depicted by British poet S.T Coleridge portrays in his poem *Kubla Khan*, in a line in second stanza such as 'By woman wailing for her demon lover!' picturing the woeful need for a lover. This image is corresponds to the Modern writer Katherine Mansfield's passive description of an entire domestic as well as three generations of women rotating round a single man, who is a son, spouse and father, in her short novel, *The Aloe*. Women, from very old ages, had subjugated and succumbed themselves to the notions of love and affection. The womanly desire for her individual space must negotiate with the notion of a platonic romantic love too in diverse rapports and possibly this may be one among the major explanations that the separation felt between romantic love and sexual desire is similarly positioned in diverse

outlooks. Previously, whores, prostitutes and female courtesans used their physical bodies, but in due course, as was inescapable, it finally directed towards a romantic participation, injured regret and distress. The major separation was framed by the conventional society which distinguished women as good/pure woman and bad/impure woman. But now with a greater awareness and control over the body, sexuality as a power in itself, separable from the idea of romance or any lifelong relationship, is an acceptable way of negotiating the difference (Jain 125).

The human body became the prime matter of concern for numerous social movements including spiritual, societal, and literary. These incidents marked certain bodily actions of individuals and always tried to create stories, legends, myths and so on about the source and later to substantiate their roles and how they employ freedom. All such themes have constantly experienced the lack of social control as a lack of power. The human body need not be always be a familial matter. It can be a pure separate being and can even be a basis of fear and fight, of terror. A disconnected dependent body will develop into a fighter body that can exist itself by a controlling power. If power is treated as a dignity of physical practice, then the body itself is mirrored in the medium of strength. A masculine body is always held together by his pressure to dominate the body of another.

Also, the human body is a significant platform where societal degrees, gender, ethnicity, location, cultural or spiritual conditions of a human being is exposed to. The ceremonial alterations assign various social positions to a man. The philosophy of the body is more discussed in the branch of anthropology. In our contemporary society, it is quite evident that the physical appearance of a particular person signifies his richness, prosperity and his ways of life style.

Religions and faiths play vital roles with human body. They bind people together by the practices of rites, rituals, religious ceremonies, etc., for example, human body occasionally gets converted into a tool of sacrifice. Religions such as Islam, Judaism and Christianity were particularly masculine in its beliefs. The contemporary interpretation of domestic life and its secularisation has had a huge and strict concerns for the conventional world views. An incomplete response to this problem is the upsurge of fundamentalism including the Moral Majority in United States. These people were observed as if they are intensely possessed with the controlling of sexuality in the matters of homosexual practice, role of women in a society, lesbian-gay weddings, and teenage sexual conducts.

Patriarchy and matriarchy are considered as orthodox ideologies that ascertain the correctness and occupancy of bodies, particularly child rearing as well as controlling of children. A Father God, Mother Nature and the physical reproduction of human bodies shares certain mutual homologies. Mythologies and folklores were grounded and developed on these homological associations. The red colored menstrual blood specifies the transmission of generations however the white colored breast milk and human semen specifies nutrition and nourishment (Turner 12).

When it comes to Judaism, the Jewish people continued various concepts about female sexuality and marriages. In the Biblical story of Genesis, the very distinctive, supportive and compassionate relationship within a male and a female was swapped after the Fall by a connection of power control. The Mosaic Law was then suggested to a culture where females were treated as mere domestic assets who had no choices of their own. Consequently, in some rustic areas, women only appeared with household chores and domestic animals. A female who was unable to produce a child was not fulfilling her responsibility as a proper wife and hence sterility was recognized as a vital characteristic

for marriage separation. The Old Testament states that infertility is the symptom of a godly disapproval. On the other side, prostitution was permitted to gratify the carnal desires of manhood. Apart from that, menstruation and child rearing was filthy procedures so that these women were frequently evaded from societal get-togethers. According to the culture of Israel, the marriages occurred between two diverse families and therefore the female companions were considered hazardous to males because of the reason that they come from outside of the husband's family (Turner 12).

The Christian church was chiefly masculine. As per the spiritual stances, the role of Virgin Mary was important in order for Jesus Christ to be deprived of all sins. But at the same time, he is born into earth as a human being so that he must be born to a woman's womb. Later, when years went Holy Mary was removed from every phase of sin and became detached from a link with the Fall. She was detached from original sin in 1854 by the principle of Immaculate Conception. Since she was released from every type of sin, she was then observed and worshipped as equal to Jesus Christ. She was later detached from all the physical connections of a female including sexual intercourse, childbirth and so on. Even the suckling of Baby Jesus was excluded. This caused in developing a cult around her breast. Later on, the subject of worshipping Mary became a vital portion of primeval Celtic belief and custom. The Holy Mary was then specified with the role of holy winner of reproduction because of the reason that there was no other powerful female character existent in the biblical stories (Turner 12-13).

The human body specifies a boundary between in-groups and out-groups of religion. The hair of human and its organization is an essential conception of group unity. Both Christianity and Judaism cover their whole hair while praying. This covering of their hair by women anticipated a purpose in describing devoutness, truthfulness and trustworthiness. For men, his beard is a prominent indicator of purity. All these are

different methods that controls the human physical body. The development of the human body sociology have effectively joined hands with spiritualism and philosophy.

For a woman, body is the place where her natural organic gender and the society fashioned gender meets together. Here, her sexuality is visualized and her erotic desires and yearnings are described along with the explanation of the exploitation, maltreatment and so on that she agonized all along her life. The communal and political significance of a woman's body together with her feminine sexuality in satisfying as well as troubling to the masculine community. This is now acknowledged by the feminists and feminist accords.

There are numerous metaphors, symbols and portraits that conveys various stories concerning feminine body and sexuality. From time to time, her physical body and her association with that brands her minor, sub-standard or second sex. Together with that, there are several stout and aggressive characters too. The Western stories have iconic womanly figures such as Medussa, Eva or Delilah who fashioned outstanding turmoil because of their astonishing dynamic attitude. If all these cases are considered, it is their feminine body and their sexuality that made them what they are. The macho thoughts, from time to time tried to interrupt, dislocate and portray them as greedy. All the above mentioned cases are some of the chief instances of portraying woman and the feminine body in the branches of philosophy, religion, science and morals. Australian philosopher and feminist Elizebeth Grosz points out in her book *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*:

Together these have done both body and women a great deal of harm in practical life. These have projected a lopsided view of both body and woman. In the mind/body dichotomy discourse, thus it has been hardly acknowledged that mind exists in body only and plays a formative role in gaining the philosophically

valued ideals like truth, knowledge and experience. Similarly, misogynist thoughts has represented or even constructed women as “frail, unruly and even unreliable”, subject to various intrusions which are not under conscious control. (Grosz 13)

When our Indian milieu is considered, there is not much difference when compared to the western situation where woman and her body is devalued and even abandoned. The Indian philosophy generally looks at the outer world by various labelled concepts such as *Purusa* and *Prakriti*, *Brahma* and *Maya* or *Siva* and *Sakthi*. These basic labels are defined in terms of soul/spirit and body/materiality. Body here remains unpolished and submissive to the soul. If body is an automobile, then the soul is the motorist. The concept of *Moksha* or redemption, according to Indian religious ideology, happens only when a physique or physical presence is transcended. The female and the risk connected with her gender is that of the physical body she possess along with her sexuality. This becomes a great problem when compared with the masculine gender. It is her sexuality that makes her an all-time wife and mother. But at certain times, the same sexuality makes her a tool of agency and freedom, of courage and strength. Therefore, she is both a need and a risk and so becomes a significant theme in the Indian manuscripts.

If the sacred works of Hinduism is evidently examined, one can certainly notice that if a woman herself controls her distinct body and sexuality, then she inevitably develops into an evil or nasty individual. On the other hand, if the woman is controlled by a man, then she possesses very generous, sympathetic and good hearted character. The similar condition can be easily observed among the Hindu Goddesses. The ‘good female goddesses’ of the religion includes Lakshmi, Parvathy and Saraswathy who are the primary consorts of Vishnu, Shiva and Brahma and so are controlled by them. While the other goddess incudes Durga, Kali and so on. They are recognized as independent

and so are vigorous and cruel. A masculine control of woman is constantly approved and valorized in the Indian philosophical framework, folklore, mythologies, Sanskrit classics, indigenous literature, etc.

A woman is an individual with her physical body and therefore they are realized as simple bodies. But a paradox seen here is that a male is given the full privilege to enter into her physical body with or without her consent. This happens in a masculine culture. Helen Cixous in her work “The Laugh of the Medussa” remarks:

We have been turned away from our bodies, shamefully taught to ignore them, to strike them with that stupid sexual modesty. We have made victim of the old fool’s game: each one will love the other sex. I will give you your body and you will give me mine. But who are the men who give women the body that women blindly yield to them? (Cixous 885-886).

The apprehensions related with the female body have not only created arrogance or contempt regarding the physique but also female herself started to internalize the misogynist thoughts. She is often referred as an ‘Unresolved Mystery’ or a ‘Dark Continent.’ She is alienated from her own physical body or otherwise her body is occupied or colonized by the masculinity. Body is something that a female occupy all the way along her life and this body which worries them and it is this body that satisfy the carnal desires of their male partners, i.e, it is this body that her husband, family, religion, society, conventions, and all those agencies require. The desires and yearnings of a feminine body are always kept locked so as to prohibit them from the aspects of dissatisfaction or unhappiness. Therefore, human sexuality, for a woman is a matter of silent and terrific zone where her wants and needs are kept closed. Therefore it is a zone for her anxieties rather than her desires.

A group of feminists believe that the feminine body, its physical nature, phase, etc., creates limits and edges for the wants and wishes of a woman in the masculine world. They certainly believe in the “natural” division between human soul and human body and feel that subjugation and harassments felt by a female body could be the outcome of her physical biology and they must extremely try to overcome this limitation. For them body is “something to be rejected in the pursuit of intellectual equality according to a masculine standard” (Price and Shildrick 2-3). There is a particular group of “societal constructionists” comprising Julia Kristeva, Juliet Mitchell, Nancy Chodorow and some other psychoanalytic and Marxist feminists who firmly consider the communal construction of this partisanship. For this group too, human physical body remains biologically resolute, stable, and ahistorical, though the mind becomes a social, cultural and historical statement (Grosz 17).

They feel that it is not biology per se, but the way it is perceived in ideology that is oppressive for women. So, the question is not how to supersede biology, but how to give new meaning and values to the body. Many of these feminists see body as something to be reclaimed as the every essence of the female. (Price and Shildrick 3)

The next group, of feminists like Helene Cixous, Jane Gallop and Luce Irigaray have a poststructuralist focus. For them, the human body is no longer recognized as an ahistorical, biologically given venture. They are further concerned with existing body and reject a mind/ body dualism. The body here is a considered as a public and comprehensive object, a “crucial site of contestation in a series of economic, political, social and intellectual struggles” (Price and Shildrick 3).

Body was yet again described in detail from 1960s onwards with the upsurge of second wave feminism. These feminists conducted a serious cross examination of the

biological sex as well as the cultural sex. They later came into the inference that there was nothing around a woman's corporeality that specified her 'obedient' and 'insignificant' roles in the community. Pregnancy or menstruation can never clarify any rational phases to distinguish women in attaining appropriate education or participating in socio-political engagements. They tried to bring the feminine physical body beyond the masculine biosphere and discussed about the role of females in an open sociocultural sphere.

If we look into the feminist literature, it openly explained how women are distinguished in the socio political civilization. It is quite obvious that males are always associated with autonomy and independence however women characters were connected with their physical body and sexuality. They were recognized as more biological and therefore had a very reserved and limited sphere of locked circuits. Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray precisely scrutinised the marginalisation of 'clearing out' of females and their sexuality in the male controlled world. The feminists have also positioned on the curriculum of re-exploring, re-examining concepts of female corporeality. They have obviously observed the feminine body with the features of sexuality, ethics and so on have designed vibrant concepts of feminine body.

The human physical body has also established into a substance of commercial product in the corporate sphere. It had emerged into a matter of consumer culture (Shilling 181). In contrast to this, the physical body is a material of sexuality, compromise and submissiveness. From the view of radicals, the physical body of a female describes her subordination, subservience and the oppressions that she suffers in her every day.

Usually, women's creativeness has been bracketed by their reproductive bodies. That is a woman is socially forced to find her artistic outlet by producing and raising

their babies. The topmost creativity for a woman was her maternity. For example, we have discussed earlier in this chapter about the image of Holy Mary with baby Jesus Christ in her hands. Such a female was more recognized as female goddess in Western civilizations, Chinese, Japanese, African and even in Indian cultural milieu. Diane Long Hoeveler and Donna Decker Schuster in the Introduction to their book *Women's Literary Creativity and the Female Body* points out that:

The historical record makes it clear that there has been a persistent focus on the female body in all attempts to understand women as creative, which has led the female to be seen as the subject of creative efforts by men, rather than the agent of creativity herself. In fact, women's bodies, as Jane Garrity argues, valued for their ability to perpetuate the British race as the central representation of British racial stability, were the primary symbols of nationalism and culture. (Hoeveler and Schuster xi)

Even in the ancient world classics, women's sexuality is considered as dangerous and vicious. Homer's *Odyssey* illustrates a very deep debate on female's sexual conduct. For example, the sexual reputation of Penelope is a chief fulcrum of the story. The positive purpose of the classic involves not only that Odysseus should return to his home, but also that Penelope must maintain her chastity. Uncontrolled sexual desire of a woman is recognized as hazardous and destructive. It intimidates not only the hero's homecoming, but also there is more emphasis on maintaining the necessary social order. In another situation, the adverse replicas of Helen and Clytemnestra describes the dangerous consequences to both individuals and community of feminine sexuality run amok. The infidelity of Helen was regarded as the major cause for Trojan War. Achaeans reached Troy for the sake of Helen. Similarly once Odysseus expressed his grief that many among them died only for the sake of Helen. Characters like Eumaeus even wished to

hear that the whole clan of Helen got destroyed. He describes Helen as a very active verb making her the direct cause of many deaths in the war. All these above statements portrays Helen and her sexual body as not only a meagre cause for the war, but also as a prime initiator and the real demolisher. Her sexual transgression is considered as the crucial reason behind all the miseries and sufferings of Odysseus: his struggles in the Trojan War, his lengthy homecoming ride, the difficulty in separation from his beloved wife and son and the whole destructions faced by his family.

Until nineteenth century, Europe, Africa and South Asia were occupied by a set of unwanted patriarchal notions relating to human body, sexuality and desire. Nivedita Menon in her book *Seeing Like a Feminist* points out that the society before the enlightenment, modernity, worked with a number of assumptions:

That is assumptions such as the idea that nature exists separately from humans as a passive, inert set of resources to be put to human use; that bodies are naturally entirely one sex or another; that hermaphroditism (bodies possessing both male and female) is a disease; and that desire naturally flows only between opposite sexes. (53)

Margaret Mead once described about masculinity and femininity across different geographical spheres and societal cultures. Not only do various communities consider a specific group of codes as feminine codes and the other group of codes as masculine, but all these symbols may not be same all around the world. Henceforth, the feminists came forward and strongly claimed that there have never existed any significant association between the masculine biology and the feminine biology and of those attributes which are thought to be masculine and feminine. Rather, it is the major practice of being pregnant and the child rearing that always tried to firmly establish and propagate variations between sexes. For example, from the very beginning of childhood onward,

both boys and girls are perfectly trained in suitable gender-specific methods of their social behavior, hair style, modes of play, dressing styles and so on. This modes continue as they grow up and establish themselves as 'being perfect' and brings conformity to the gender. Therefore, the specific gender qualities such as courage, self-reliance, physical strength and so on must be adhered to the boys and shyness, humility, empathy, gentleness and such traits should be adhered to the girls. These gender values to males and females that are imposed by the society are produced by different institutions, social beliefs, religious rites and rituals, customs and so on. It is as Simone de Beauvoir pointed out in her *The Second Sex*, "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman" (330) which states femininity is a construction of civilisation. A woman is gradually shaped by her social upbringing. She remarks:

One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman. No biological, psychic, or economic destiny defines the figure that the human female takes on insociety; it is civilization as a whole that elaborates this intermediary product between the male and the eunuch that is called feminine. Only the mediation of another can constitute an individual as an *Other*. Inasmuch as he exists for himself, the child would not grasp himself as sexually differentiated. For girls and boys, the body is first the radiation of a subjectivity, the instrument that brings about the comprehension of the world: they apprehend the universe through their eyes and hands, and not through their sexual parts. (330)

Situation regulates character, not the other way around. A woman is not born or just formed; she is gradually moulded by her communal upbringing. Biology does not regulate what styles a woman a woman—in fact, she learns her roles and duties from man and others in society. She is not born as submissive, inferior, and nonessential, but all the powers in the outside world have combined to make her so. Each distinct self,

irrespective of their gender, is allowed to subjectivity; it is only external powers that have conspired to rob woman of this right. Destiny is not a cosmic energy but the personal choice of every human, the result of his/her culture and context.

When we explain the distinction between sex and gender in connection with biology and culture, we could find that a female's physical body is molded by several communal constraints and standards of beauty. Specifically, the 'physical body' is fashioned more by culture than by nature. For example, the quick advancements in the athletic accounts of women over the previous two decades have molded the strong capabilities of their physical bodies too. Certain feminist theoreticians have argued that in several indigenous cults, there slight bodily differences are found between males and females. In brief, it should be accepted that there exists two different phases at work. One major aspect is a wide series of interconnected modes by which our social orders produces sex differences. On the other hand, sex differences formulates a culture in specific methods. Nivedita Menon hence points out in her work *Seeing Like a Feminist*:

'Sex', seen thus, is not an unchanging base upon which society constructs 'gender' meanings, but rather, sex itself has been affected by various factors external to it - there is no clear and unchanging line separating nature and culture. A second kind of rethinking of sex/gender has come from a kind of feminism which argues that feminists must not underplay the biological difference between the sexes, and attribute all difference to 'culture' alone. To do so is to accept male civilization's devaluing of the female reproductive role. (65)

In the medieval days, a woman talking about her body to break the patriarchal structure was not an easy task. It was at this point where Bhakti poets violated this social construction and emerged as the pioneers of Indian feminism. The male poets protested on eradication of caste and creed issues whereas the female saints spoke against gender

inequality. It was not a change defined by the medieval male parameters. They depicted the realities of their time by depicting the social patriarchy. The status of a woman was defined in terms of her role in a family as an obedient daughter, submissive wife and responsible homely mother. Crushed and confined to this male patriarchy and daily domestic livelihood, these women found an alternative possibility in the form of devotion. Renouncing their earthly marriage and material life, they directed their desires and passions towards the heavenly deities.

For the medieval women devotion slowly became an outlet. A study of their lyrics portray that they negotiated the patriarchy shackles through the mode of devotion and love, which provided an open space for them. They received a better platform to express their freedom and mobility.

Chapter 3

Desiring Devotees: An Analysis of Early Bhakti Poets—Andal and Akka Mahadevi

The Bhakti movement, consisting of several devotional cults of many hues and colours, had an excessive influence upon the women lives of India. Many among them tried to do away with the various taboos, rites, rituals, pollutions and all other irregularities and dogmas that dominated the Hindu culture of medieval period. While some recognised the need for the equality of male-female gender, some others worked to strengthen the inequalities in practice. It is too complex to analyse and define all the various social, political and historical aspects of the movement which existed for many centuries during medieval period. But, a sheer effort to examine its nature as a mass pan Indian movement (despite all its regional differences and imbalances) that is accountable for refining the status of Indian women appears worthy. This chapter focuses into the major female poets of Bhakti movement and how they tried to create a space of their own through their lyrics, in a period where men and masculinity were considered as the strong and noble powers of the medieval society. The hostile situations of caste, religion, gender, culture and language formed several strong renaissance movements all along India. Bhakti was the basic root for all these widespread protests. All other renaissance struggles in India are either directly or indirectly connected with the philosophies of Bhakti movement. The establishment of English East India Company and the commencement of colonial rule made the medieval society more rigid. Consequently, the idea of renaissance emerged and this 'progressive' and 'radical' political programme is still considered as a pioneer to the arrival of nationalism.

Even though we face the lack of historical texts and records of ancient India, all these texts provide a better space for women and they claim a very high status for the females through often quoting the examples of Maitreyi, who is regarded as one of the most learned and virtuous women of ancient India and represents intelligent women in India, and Gargeyi, a brilliant philosophical scholar who made rich contributions to spread education and even surpassed men in her abundant knowledge. Moreover, the invocatory mantra of Atharva Veda addresses God as '*devi*' and the fourteenth book of this series completely deals with women, wedding, and other domestic concerns. Apart from that, along with men, women also attended religious ceremonies, because of the existence of 'Ardhanaari' concept (the essential other half of the man).

At the same time, the social dogmas like *Sati* and Child marriage is credited to the next period – Medieval ages – where India, for the first time witnessed political uncertainties and continuous wars, caste discriminations and deterioration of the status of Indian women. Texts like *Manusmriti* changed the entire aspect and openly stated that woman must be kept in complete dependence by the men and must be under their strict control. All along her life, she is never allowed to lead an independent life. During their childhood a girl should be controlled by her father, husband protects her in youth and during her old age, her sons.

Such kinds of stiff and social immoralities brought more and more deteriorations in the Indian society. It was the Brahmin people, who stood at the top of the caste hierarchy pyramid and carried the main responsibility of creating such a rigid and defensive social structure. They established several rites and rituals, rigid taboos on lower caste people (*Sudras*) and women of the medieval society. These social inequalities, conditions and suffocations faced by the common people of the period made them to strongly protest and unite under a same umbrella – Bhakti (Devotion) – a

religious movement that could wipe out all these existing injustices. The Bhakti movement while protesting against various socio-religious injustices also introduced new socio-religious reforms which in turn helped modern India to absorb and introduced most modern reforms for the Indian society in general and for Indian women and the untouchables in particular (Mullatti 2). Before entering into the poets in particular, it is important to analyse the social conditions faced by the women of those medieval ages.

The patriarchal beliefs always welcomed the birth of a boy child rather than that of a girl. Because, the custom of wedding always treated women as mere machines who were born to meet the whims and fancies of a man along with the domestic households. The marriage tradition treated women only as a tool of reproduction. They were subjected to be obedient to the other family members, especially to males. The husband was considered as the 'lord' of her entire life, and the wife should not have any particular likings, wishes, ambitions, etc. They never possessed any rights on their family properties and had no classes on religious studies. Child marriage was a common custom among all families. They were restricted to the four walls of their houses and had no particular wishes of their own. In the in-law's house, a newly wedded girl is considered as 'Lakshmi' (Hindu Goddess of wealth and richness) on the first day of her wedding. But from the very next day onwards, she becomes a chattel. The cruel system of 'Sati' and the conditions of young widows were really worst. If a widow disagrees to perform Sati, then her life was worse than being to hell. She will be regularly exploited and tortured by both the male and female members of the family.

The complexities of the rigid caste system were characterized by several prohibitions on intermixing, inter-dinings and inter-marriages. Even caste groups will have several sub-castes among them, and all of them will be forced to lead their own small life. The higher caste regularly exploited the lower castes and considered it as their

right and privilege. The lower castes were considered as untouchables. All these social dogmas prevailed in the society on the backdrop of religion and religious consent. And on the top of all these, excessive use of *karma marga* sin cleansing rituals by Brahmins left masses to a totally fatalistic and subjugated life (Mullatti 3).

It is in the Hindu holy book *Bhagawat Gita*, from where we get the first accurate explanation regarding the methods of worship. These specific methods are called as *marga* or 'ways'. According to Hindu religious beliefs, there are primarily three ways of worshipping God to commence any kind of religious doings to attain ultimate salvation or 'moksha'. They are namely *Jnana*, *Karma* and *Bhakti*. The first one, *Jnana* consists of the intelligent and rational attitude which can be found in Upanishads or other similar texts. *Karma* is based on the ritualistic methods. This can be found in Vedic texts, *Sutras* or *Shastras*. *Bhakti* (devotion), the third method was a secondary one that was present in a complementary approach in the other two methods.

It was during the 10th century that *Bhakti* – 'intense personal love, devotion and dedication to God' became a prime factor of worship. It was saints like Ramanujacharya and Madhwacharya, the early prominent Brahmin chiefs from South India who started using the *Bhakti-Marga* for the sacred activities. They declared that even though it is sacred, the extreme use of both *Jnana* and *Karma* will welcome socio-religious evils, exploitations and injustices to the society. Hence, the principal use of *Bhakti-Marga* was the initial protest of these religious saints. The second way of protest and resistance was the use of medieval vernacular languages to write religious writings, spread the religious methods, prayers and communicate with the masses. They rejected the use of Sanskrit, which was considered as the high class and sacred language.

For example, consider the example of Basaveshwara's rationalistic question regarding the role of a priest. A devotee prays God through *Bhakti-Marga*, only because

of his/her passionate love and devotion to God. Leela Mullatti, in the Introduction to her book, *The Bhakti Movement and the Status of Women* points out that:

So Basaveshwara questions, how can a Brahmin pray on behalf of the devotee (as was done till under Karma-Marga ritual)? According to him, a devotee's worship is of an extremely passionate, personal and intimate nature. Comparing such worship and the relation between a devotee and his God as a union between husband and wife, he questions, "how can love making between a husband and wife, like a devotee and his God, be done by a deputy – a Brahmin?" Thus Basava in particular and all *Bhakti* saints in general rejected the Brahmins' mediatory and superior role in the religious field. (4-5)

This development helped the Indian women to improve their status. The women, who were restricted inside the four walls of their houses were very illiterate, ignorant and superstitious by all means. Knowing this clear situation of those poor homemakers, the Brahmins and the other superior classes always found entertainment in exploiting them in all the possible ways they could. A Brahmin widow should either commit Sati or must complete shave off her head. In the name of preserving purity and virtuousness, they were allowed to eat a single meal a day. Some other women were asked to take strict vows like fasting on almost all the days of a week. They have to visit several religious shrines throughout their life. At times, they were even sexually exploited. Therefore, discarding the dominance of the Brahmin community saved women from these torturing to a very great extent.

As it is clear that religion is always a pervading influence upon the daily life of Indian people, the entry of women into the sphere of religion and then becoming independent religious leaders is highly meaningful. Both male and female saints have at

many times asked the same question that is whether the Lord 'Atma' that resides in everyone belong to male gender or female gender.

These situations explains not only the freedom that the women acquired from their daily domestic confined lives, but also a revolutionary change that the medieval women were actually enjoying for the very first time. They enjoyed religious delights, intermixing with other caste and creed, and started to strongly face and react against the exploitations and discriminations that they face in the medieval society.

Such women wrote their lyrics in the 'language of the common man', people who were just like them who knew no Sanskrit. Therefore they selected vernacular languages with pure beauty of its idioms and phrases, which every follower can easily relate. These lyrics contained the spirit and simplicity of the colloquial dialects.

Freedom of expression meant that poetry came out of the respected courts and holy shrines and reached into homes of common folks and paddy fields where local women had their domestic lives. They brought their Lord to their private life – into their homes, kitchens, gardens, bedrooms and even to their hearts. They sang about the hardships of their life, disloyal husbands, cruel mother-in-laws, malicious sister-in-laws, and every time reminding their Lord to come and take part with them. There were many poems representing individual expressions of female desires. Even though they transferred their love, lust, hunger and yearnings to their Lord, their linguistic expressions are too human, constantly intimate and frequently, were, very erotic.

While examining the tales and legends of these female Bhakti saints who lived during various centuries, one could easily find several similarities in their lives. They were all very young in their ages, who easily recognized their unconditional love to their Lord and left their domestic life single minded, to unite with their Lord. When examined more closely, those legends about their lives often seem dreamy or impractical, occupied

with much fantasies and illusions, and eccentricities about how they observed themselves and their God. For an adolescent girl intent on getting wedded to her Lord, devotion sometimes becomes more erotic, while at the same time, for the intelligent mystic, everything including clothes, seems restrictive.

These female saints always had an intense yearning for the unification with their Lord. They were strictly concerned about the immortality of the soul that remains after death. They strongly believed that this immortal soul will soon merge with the supreme power. The soul was thus made up of divine love, sinless and unsullied in its compassion. These poetic saints had to powerfully fight to attain wide reception in a male dominated society. But their exceptional poetic talent and their stubborn perseverance of their saintly equality, made the medieval society to accept them at least half-heartedly. Their tales are purely personal narratives covering the extent of what it means to be a real woman.

The Bhakti movement had blossomed first from the south, especially from the Tamil lands (Tamizhakam) from almost 6th century AD. There were 63 Nayanars (Saivites) and 12 Alwars (Vaishnavites). But, among all of them, there were only two women Bhakti saints – Karaikkal Ammaiyar (Nayanar) and Andal (Alwar).

Andal was a passionate poetess of Tamil Bhakti movement. The legend of Andal is compared to that of Sita of *Ramayana*. She was born at Srivilliputtur, a village near Tirunelli, in Tamil Nadu during 7th or 8th centuries. During these periods, both the Alwar community and Nayanar community were busy with composing delightful songs and hymns of Lord Vishnu and Lord Shiva. According to the tale of Andal, she was born as a baby girl in a basil garden of Vishnuchitta Alwar. He took the little baby and she grew up with her foster father in a spiritual surrounding. During her childhood itself,

she attained deep knowledge about the myths and legends relating to Lord Vishnu and his ten incarnations.

The name of Andal has two different meanings. One of them is ‘the girl who ruled over the Lord’ and the other one is ‘that which attracts’. It is said that the mental consciousness of Andal was purely captivated by the deep love and dedication she had with the Lord from her very childhood days. Several legends about Andal says that she finally achieved her long time determination by uniting with her Lord at Srirangam. In an article named “On Women saints” the author A. K. Ramanujan mentioned that unlike men, women often have to reject normative family life to pursue their spiritual goals. In some cases, it might be like that of Karaikkal Ammaiyar, where the husband and family accept such a rejection and allows the woman to pursue her path. On the other side, it may appear like that of Kannada saint Akka Mahadevi, where the transgression of the social norms is at its peak and no one sanctions such a decision. Archana Venkatesan, in her book, *The Secret Garland* points out that:

Antal falls somewhere in between these two figures – her poetry, especially the *Nasong of cciyar Tirumozhi*, is radical for its frank eroticism and disturbing images of violence. But her mythic life, enshrined in the hagiographies, presents a more comfortable picture, where the father aids in securing his daughter’s impossible goal of marriage to Visnu. (8)

Tiruppavai and *Nacciyar Tirumozhi* are the two major poems composed by Andal. Among them, *Tiruppavai* is a single narrative and delightful poem of thirty hymns. The poem describes the cheerful journey to the residence of Lord Krishna to meet him and to unite with him. The word *Tiruppavai* itself is composed of two words – ‘Tiru’ and ‘Pavai’ which means ‘a sacred vow undertaken by a girl’. It is considered as a spiritual poetry of highest order which comprises all the charisma, pleasure, simplicity, delight,

warmth and the strong intensity of a hymn, idyll, lyric and ballad. The splendour of the poem lies in the amusement and perfect fulfilment it offers to the general public, masses, folks, children, etc. It also offers great philosophical thoughts to the seekers of truth and the scholars of philosophy.

As a young girl, Andal had a profound understanding of myths and legends of Narayana and Vaishnava thoughts that influenced her poetic brilliance that she recounts in each incarnations and stories of Lord Narayana. Coupled with these allusive traits, she sings of her physical passions. Periyalwar, her foster father, is celebrated for her charming verses of 'pillaitamil' where the lord is cherished and worshipped as a child. Andal devotes songs of *Nacciyar Tirumozhi* to these childish aspects of Lord Krishna, where she constructs herself and Lord Krishna as childhood playmates. But when she enters into adolescent age, she starts to see him not as a childhood friend, but as her beloved lover. In the book *Andal: The Autobiography of a Goddess* by Priya Sarukai and Ravi Sankar, the authors point out:

But as she turns into adolescent, she begins to see him, not as playmate, but as her lover. His absence only provokes Andal into specifically explicit expositions of her body's need for his smell, taste, touch on her; she wishes to be consumed by He-Who-Rests-on-the-Cosmic-Ocean. It is important to note that body is not viewed as a vehicle that carries the mind and *atma* but is *itself* the site of illumination; the physical *is* the sacred. (39)

Such ideas were always prevalent in the entire verses of Andal where she regarded her body as a temple and her mind, being *sanctum sanctorum* (and the sensory organs likened to lamps lighting the temple that must be kept aflame in order to illuminate the body-temple).

In the poem *Tiruppavai*, Andal has re-created the heavenly atmosphere of Lord Krishna's Gokul. Her homeland, Srivilliputtur became Gokul, and she herself became the beautiful maid at Gokul (*Gopika*), who preaches her Lord. The *Bhagawata* story from epics is recreated by Andal. Her adaptation of the story provides a base for the setting of *Tiruppavai*. In stanza 2, 'Vaiyattu Valvirkal' of Archana Venkatesan's translation of *Tiruppavai*, Andal sings:

Kohl does not darken our eyes
and flowers do not adorn our hair.

We do nothing that is wrong
and speak nothing that is evil

Instead we give freely

and offer arms to those in need. (Venkatesan 52)

Blending nature as well as Bridal Mysticism, *Tiruppavai* becomes a beautiful musical composition sung by a little maiden girl in the banks of river Vaiga in Madurai. Here, Andal places Radha (Andal herself) as the maiden girl, river Vaiga as river Yamuna of North and Madurai as Vrindavan. The thirty days vow (*pavai nombu*) is a penance followed strictly by Andal that aims in the sublime unification with her Lord. In stanza 26 'Male Manivanna',

O great one, the color of a dark gem

If you ask us what we need

for this ancient Markali vow, performed even by our ancestors

Listen, these are it:

conches

like your *pancajanya*, white as milk

that makes the world shudder with its deep sound

a large magnificent *parari*-drum
 chanters singing the *pallantu*
 beautiful lamps, canopies, banners.
 Lord who floats upon a banyan leaf
 bless us with all this. (Venkatesan 76)

The mood presented in the above lines is of clean '*Madhurya Bhava*' which is absolutely an act of all other Alvars (or even their imagination), who belong to masculine gender. There lies many esoteric meanings in the above stanza. The conch here stands for 'Pranava' (AUM) that all human beings, irrespective of their caste, creed or gender, belong to the Lord. The drum is the symbol of 'Paratantrya' referring that all of us are directly or indirectly dependent upon him. It also signifies the meaner desires. The bath which the maiden girls are about to plunge into is the deep immersion of God's love. This stanza is one of the concluding portions of *Tiruppavai* and here the maidens are getting very closer to their Lord and the deity is addressed as Love-incarnate, person who possess boundless feelings, care and love for those who approach Him. *Madhurya Bhava* is clearly depicted here. Apart from the individual salvation that a single Bhakta achieves, a kind of complete liberation is attained by a whole community. The whole work is a quest for harmony and bliss. The waking up of the maidens in the initial stanzas can be a metaphor representing the waking up of Alvar saints by Andal or it can be again re-interpreted as waking up of the entire community or even the whole human race to gain salvation and blessings. The interest of the community was more important for the Alvar saints rather than their personal likings. It was one of their chief objectives. They tried to tie people to the ideas of love, kindness, harmony, warmth and thus show them the correct path of love and devotion for God. They always communicated the messages concerning equality and brotherhood. In *Tiruppavai*, not a

single friend of Andal is left behind. Each of them participates in the ‘Margazhi bath’ to attain salvation and unite with their Lord. The hymns of *Tiruppavai* falls under the category of *Madhurya Bhakti*. A noted example of this category can be seen in the Radha-Krishna love. It is the kind of love for Lord Krishna that one could have for a love or spouse. Here, lord is treated as the lover. For Andal, she is the devotee (Gopika) and Krishna is her lover.

Andal’s legend has a great similarity with that of Sita in *Ramayana*. According to the legend, King Janaka finds Sita from a groove and the ‘Balakanda’ depicts that Sita was born from the womb of earth, not of an ordinary women. In the ‘Uttarakanda’, she was taken back to the earth by her mother. The same happens with the story of Andal – born in a garden and merged with her favourite deity. G. Mohana Charyulu in his article, “Bridal Mysticism in Andal’s Poetry” points out:

She lived in an era where there were no women saints or poetess. She was the only women Alwar saint in South Indian history. The fact that the Alvars are from a variety of social strata that included Sudras and a women indicates how liberal the Bhakti cult has been towards class, caste and gender – the divisions which were helped by the larger pan – Indian tradition until then. (Charyulu 97)

The significance of Andal rises to the extreme when one analyses the socio-political situations of women during the medieval periods in Tamil Nadu. Even the birth of a girl child was not greeted with great pleasure. The middle class families found girls as a problem and many families grieved at the birth of a girl child. However, on the other side, the birth of a boy child was a great celebration for the whole family. The prime duties of a woman were to be a submissive wife to her husband and a responsible and caring mother to her children. They were mostly illiterate and were given no space to express about their rights and wishes. Marriage was considered as one of the prestigious

ceremonies and dowry was given in the form of money and ornaments. Polygamy was widely practised and widows were not permitted to participate in any occasions of celebration such as weddings, festivals and so on. Most of the widows therefore approved the system of *Sati*.

In terms of Vaishnava Bhakti, Andal is much related to Mirabai of Rajasthan in the usage of erotic terms to describe her intense love and desire towards her beloved. A. K. Ramanujan's essay "On Women Saints" considerably remarks that, "The chief mood of *bhakti* is the erotic (*sringara*), seen almost entirely from an Indian women's point of view whether in its phase of separation or union" (270). He additionally highlights the point that these feminine personae could be of three different forms: *kanta* (wife), *parakiya* (illicit lover) and *abhisarika* (trysting woman). What Andal intended in the end of her both poetic compositions is to perform the role of a *kanta* that could be attained only through the unification with the divine Lord. According to Andal, her physical body was a strong tool that leads her towards transcendence.

Her depiction of Bridal Mysticism (*Madhurya Bhava*) has no equal or parallel version till today. In her verses, Andal tries to include all her companion girls and asks them to take part in the ritual. This itself is a strong revival weapon. It can be interpreted as her call for uniting and fighting for the freedom for her expressions. The roots of South Indian feminism can be traced from the life and works of Andal. The theme of agency is widely accepted and praised in Andal. Her description of carnal love and desire for her beloved was a kind of severe shock to the 'moralists' and masculine powers of the period.

In the article "Spiritual Significance of Gopis of Brindavan" spiritual expert Dr. Prema Pandurang explains about the spiritual significance of the Vrindavan Gopis that comes in connection with the *Tiruppavai* lyrics of Andal. According to her the Gopis are

the real incarnations of God-love. As long as they kept their love secret, everything was fine. But later, it was exposed to the world. They tried to keep their devotion in complete secrecy and hence they were called as ‘Gopi’ that means ‘to be secretive’. They sheltered their Lord from revealing Himself or else King Kamsa of Mathura may send his emissaries to kill their Lord. Thus by protecting him safely, they enjoyed the presence of their Lord in several ways. Dr. Pandurang wrote, “With her eyes she drinks His beauty/ With her ears she drinks His flute music/ With her skin she enjoys divine touch” (320). She further describes that there are different ways to feel and enjoy the presence of God. Some people find Him in complete meditation whereas some others know Him through their knowledge and wisdom. There are some others who realize God through their physical bodies. Andal, who defines herself as a Gopi falls under this category. Her *Tiruppavai* is a celebration of the joy and happiness of the Gopis of Vrindavan, including herself. Even though they are interested in keeping their devotion in extreme secrecy, at times, overwhelmed with joy the maiden girls begin to sing. Those songs were not mere compositions of a poet, but they were the outcomes of their unending desire and devotion towards the Lord. Their true devotion of love emanates from their heart as sweet melodies. At some peak, this love is also dance. Here the Lord of Andal can dance well; he is a connoisseur of music and a melodious flute player. It is said that in dispassion (*Vairagya* mood) a disappointment is present whereas in love (*prema* segment) a hope is present. For Andal the process of yearning God is a mystery. Andal in a way, indirectly portrays the Rasalila of Krishna. Dr. Pandurang further describes:

The Gopi is not a person; she is a concept personified-she is devotion, surrender, beauty, creativity, imagination, humility, sacrifice, all put together. She has no identity of her own; she lives in Krishna; conscious of Him all the time. She

waits for Krishna to come into the world. She catches his Lila. She complains to Yashoda about little Krishna's mischiefs because she loves His divine mischief. She knows the impact of flute music and takes part in the cosmic dance. (323)

Dr. K. R. Vittal Doss in the second chapter of his book *Alwars and the Indian Vaishnavite Literatures* explains about Andal's *Madhurya Bhakti*. Self surrender is the most essential factor of *Madhurya Bhakti*. Andal accepts the Pratyaksa Kanta bhava of Bridal Mysticism where she considers herself as a maiden girl and loves Sri Krishna. She decorates herself and appears as a beautiful young woman who waits for her lover. She sometimes even behaves as the consort of Lord. This type of worship may create illusion as well as delusion. The Tamil Alwars were one among the pioneers who introduced *Madhurya Bhakti* literature in the later periods. Also, they were the initial poets who followed almost all the aspects of love found in the Akam poetry of Sangham period in the later *Madhurya Bhakti* lyrics (Doss 172). In the stanza 29, 'Cirrancirukale' of *Tiruppavai*, Andal sings:

Know this Govinda
 We have not come here
 for the *parai*-drum
 For all time:
 for this birth and every birth that follows
 We are only yours.
 We serve only you.
 Direct our every other desire toward you. (79)

Here in this stanza, Andal's direct desire for the unification with her Lord is taken by a single overriding desire which is to be with her beloved and be with Him in all the coming births too. There are two important suggestions here – one that the devotee

values the togetherness with her beloved above everything else, and two, once the revelation has been experienced, all lowly desires are automatically shed off. (Tyagi 72-73)

In the stanza 5 ‘Mayanai Mannu’ Andal describes about the ‘purity’ of the maiden girls. She writes:

lord who plays
 by the great unsullied waters of the Yamuna
 radiant beacon
 of the cowherd clan,
 Damodara
 who brightened his mother’s womb –
 We are pure and
 come to you
 with these fresh flowers.
 we sing of you
 we think of you. (Venkatesan 55)

The purity referred in the above lines is not about the ritual purity or hygiene a girl should possess. It is the purity of intent and extreme love for Lord. The final destination of the flowers is to lie upon God’s feet. River Yamuna attained her self purity through the association of the river with Lord Krishna’s divine body even from the time of his birth. Similar to the girls who are purified by their intense love for their beloved, the flowers too are transformed by the extreme devotion of love by the worshippers.

In the stanza 8, ‘Kilvanam Velenru’ Andal sings about how the girls experience their God:

All the girls eager to go, have not gone

but wait for you.

We have come to rouse you

spirited girl

Wake up now. (Venkatesan 58)

Here, the girls possess a very single minded goal of meeting the Lord and specify that they are not ready to wait passively for his return. Rather, they have seized the initiative to accept Him. The intimacy between the God and devotee is mentioned. The girls meet Krishna to show their emaciated grown up bodies because of their separation from Him. Till this point, every girl has experienced Lord as her own internally, individually as well as secretly. But under the pretext of *pavai* vow, they wish to experience Him in public, with no secret codes but with the communal participation of other fellow devotees.

In the stanza 20, 'Muppattu Muvar' Andal indirectly describes about the unification with the Beloved:

Gentle Nappinnai

woman with soft breasts shaped like copper pots

lustrous red lips and slender hips

O Sri

Abandon your sleep.

Give us fan and the mirror

and command your beloved

to bathe us, this very instant. (Venkatesan 70)

The bathing act is a significant factor of taking a vow. From the Sangham point of view, bathing is a strong metaphor of sexual union (Venkatesan 121). Here, the sexual union further points out the unification with Lord. The bathing sequence is used

indirectly several times in stanzas 1, 2 and 3 symbolizing the immersion of maiden girls in Lord Krishna. Here, in the 20th stanza, this becomes a direct conception. The girls are at the door of death because of the separation they felt from their Lord. They manifested their emaciated bodies and only Krishna could save them. They ask Nappinnai, Krishna's consort, to command Him.

It is from this dark scenario, Andal emerged as a reformer and later as a 'Goddess'. She lived her life according to her own wishes. Autonomy and freedom marked her character. She herself took all the decisions of her life and lived according to that. In an era, where women were strictly restricted from expressing their desire and wishes, Andal openly wrote about her carnal desires and her unending yearning for her beloved. Her lyrical compositions delineate the different stages of a woman lover who is entirely trapped in the web of love. In *Nacciyar Tirumozhi*, she writes:

My breasts seek the gaze of the one
 whose beautiful hand lifts the discus.
 Bound tightly in a red cloth, their eyes
 Shy away from the gaze of mere mortals
 desiring none other than Govinda.
 I cannot live here a moment longer.

Please take me to the shores of the Yamuna. (Venkatesan 181)

Andal begins *Nacciyar Tirumozhi* with an invocation to Kamadava and the mythical love story between Lord Shiva and Goddess Parvati. Actually, *Nacciyar Tirumozhi* begins where *Tiruppavai* ends. The later text is a presentation of a ritual prayer or vow undertaken by unmarried girls to attain a virtuous husband. In *Nacciyar Tirumozhi* the desire never gets altered and the husband mentioned here remains Vishnu/Krishna.

In the Song 2, Song of the Sandcastles, Andal directly mentions how her beloved enter into heart. She sings:

You enter our courtyard
 show us your lovely face, your sweet smile
 do you intend to break our sandcastles
 and our hearts well?
 O Govinda, who leaped and stretched
 to span and the earth and sky
 if you embrace us like this
 what will our neighbors say? (Venkatesan 153)

Here, in the above lines, Krishna enters house from the courtyard to embrace her physical body and to enter into her heart. Krishna enters without permission to make love with her, to wrest her beautiful bangles or to break her 'sandcastles'. These lines points out Krishna's union with Andal, where their two bodies become one.

In the first part of the *Song of Divination* (Song 4), Andal wishes to care the feet of her Lord. This act is a perfect example of an absolute surrender and service to Lord Vishnu, symbolizing the wifely duties of his consort Lakshmi. Andal wishes to unite with Him in an intimate and inseparable manner of wifely service. The following lines portray this image:

Scholars and gods bow before you
 noble bridegroom, lord of Tirumaliruncolai.
 If I should remain forever in that place where he reclines
 to press and caress his holy feet,
 Fall together, O *kutal!* (Venkatesan 157)

In the following verses of the entire song we see the picture of Andal playing the *kutal* game yearning for her exclusive unification with beloved. In the *kutal* game the even number specifies union whereas the odd number denotes separation. The word *kutal* means 'to come together'. The *kutal* asks to predict the union of Andal with Lord Krishna. The rhythmic meter (*kaliviruttam*) of the entire verse suggests the eagerness and long term desire for the union (Venkatesan 198). She ends the section singing:

Kotai of Visnucittan
sang a song of the lovely maidens of Ayarpati
of their quarrels and friendships, their intimacy and bickering
of long waits and a *kutal* game. (Venkatesan 158)

Through the entire verses of the *Song to the Kuyil* (Song 5), Andal represents herself as a woman who is strongly tied up in the complete throes of unrequited love from her lover. This particular section of *Nacchiar Tirumozhi* has several delicate allusions to the old Sangham poetry. It uses the image of her pet-parrot and the messenger *kuyil*. In the stanza 5.8, Andal hints that a secret has been shared between her and her Lord. The stanza leads us to make believe that the same messenger bird was the witness to all the intimacies shared by the lovers. Andal wrote:

My clever and perfect lord
whose mighty arms easily wield the *sarnga* bow
between him and me
a secret has passed
that only he and I know.
O delicate *kuyil* living in this grove
amid these trees laden with sweet ripe mangoes
ing your sweet song of summons

to my beautiful lord.

Make him return to me quickly

Then you will witness what I do to him. (Venkatesan 161)

The sixth decad, *The Song of the Wedding Dream*, is the most popular of the entire text. It describes in detail the wedding of Andal with Lord Vishnu with every specific association s. Even today, this stanza is sung in Brahmin Srivaishnava marriages, and the bride and groom are considered as the living embodiments of Andal and Vishnu. The decad begins with entry of the groom to the city and ends with the couple celebrating the grand ceremony in an elite tour around the adorned city streets on elephants. The wedding takes place after a long term of separation between the lovers. Andal sings:

We were smeared with vermilion and cool sandalwood

then he and I together rode on the elephants

and circled the festive streets

They drenched us in fragrant waters.

Such a vision I dreamed, my friend.

Kotai of the king of Villiputtur

city of Vaishnava fame

wove this garland of pure Tamil

of her dream for the lord of cowherds. (Venkatesan 164-165)

The next decad, *The Song to the White Conch* (Song 7), as the title suggests focuses on the conch of Narayana. Andal praises the conch, which is unique in Alwar literature. Here, here lord is addresses as Madhava and Madhusudhana. The conch stands as a strong symbol of union (conch) as well as separation by portraying conch bangles. In Indic sense, bangles represent a woman's loss and separation, which is explained in

Song 9 – *The Song for the Conch Bangles*. Conch is always interpreted as something very close to Lord Vishnu. She asks:

Are they fragrant as camphor? Are they fragrant as lotus?

Or do these coral red lips taste sweet?

I ache to know the taste, the fragrance of the lips

Of Madhava, who broke the tusk of elephant.

Tell me, O white conch from the deep sea. (Venkatesan 166)

Andal once enjoyed this sweetness of her beloved's conch in his lips. It is also something that is always inseparable from the hands of Vishnu like those inseparable figures of a bedchamber. Likewise Andal is also inseparable and unbreakable from her beloved. Even the solar disc of Narayana gets separated from his hands when he dispenses the disc from his hand for a significant mission. On the other hand, the conch, at any circumstance, never leaves his hands. Moreover, when he needs it he never dispenses it away as the disc. Instead, he brings the conch closer to his lips, which denotes the greatest intimacy he has.

The eighth song, *The Song to the Dark Rain Clouds*, is also a messenger poem similar to decad five. The messenger poems are a common genre of early Indic poets made famous by *Meghadoota* by Kalidasa. In these lines, Andal asks the dark rain clouds to act as a messenger to inform her lover about her loneliness and suffering due to the long separation from Him.

O clouds that spill lovely pearls

What message has the dark-hued lord

of Venkatam

sent through you?

The fire of desire has invaded my body

I suffer. (Venkatesan 168)

As per the Indic literary scenario, the rain or rainy season denotes union and an absent hero invariably promises to return before the coming of the monsoons (Venkatesan 208). Here, her beloved might have promised her that he would arrive before the monsoon falls. So, when she sees the dark rain clouds she mistakes that her beloved arrived as he promised. The word cloud *megha* (Tamil-*mekar*) represents a class of servants, who precede a king. She therefore finds the appearance of clouds as the announcement of the nature to her king's arrival. Here, Andal can be compared to Sita, who was imprisoned by Ravana in Lanka where she waits for Rama. When Hanuman observed Sita crying he consoles her worries and fears promising the arrival of Rama to save her. Her tears were like dewdrops on a beautiful lotus petal. In the case of Andal, there has no one to turn to and eventually her sufferings of separation are greater than that of Sita and she is in need for her beloved's quick grace (Venkatesan 208).

Andal asks for the physical touch, care and attention from her Lord. This song is one of the most sexually explicated lyrics of Andal. She frankly expresses her strong desire and yearning for her beloved. A woman like Andal who is steeped in the discipline of ultimate devotion, who regard Narayana as her lover, blossoms when united with him and fades when separated from him. Here she chose *sringara* (desire/love) to portray her unending longing for Him (Venkatesan 209). Andal sings:

O clouds bright with lightning
 Tell the lord of Venkatam
 upon the lovely chest Sri resides
 that my supple young breasts
 yearn everyday
 for his resplendent body. (Venkatesan 169)

She further expresses her intense desire to unite with her Beloved in the twelfth song – *The Song of sacred Places*. She expresses her strong desire and willingness to meet and unite with Him in ecstasy. She calls her Beloved as Govinda. She asks him to take her to the shores of Yamuna – the real ‘Ayarpati’ of Krishna. Andal asks:

My breasts seek the gaze of the one
 whose beautiful hand lift the discus
 Bound tightly in a red cloth, their eyes
 shy away from the gaze of mere mortals
 desiring none other than Govinda.

I cannot live here a moment longer.

Please take me to the shores of Yamuna. (Venkatesan 181)

Here, Andal becomes active and asks her mothers to take her to the places of Lord Krishna and thereby unite her with Him. She realizes that she had completely fallen under the love web of Krishna. She was caught by the disease of separation. All her previous efforts to unite with her love failed miserably. Even though she is happy to unite with Him, Krishna has not yet arrived. Hence, she goes to meet Him to his place. But her excessive suffering had robbed her physical strength and unable to make the too lengthy and difficult journey, she asks her mothers to take her off. She asks them to take her and leave her at His doorstep. It is not clear in the lyrics that who these real mothers are. Sangam poems tend to portray a natural mother as well as foster mother. Often in these poems, the mother will always mistake her child’s illness for some type of possession by God and summon an exorcist to cure the child (daughter). In Andal’s lyrics it is signified as love-sickness and possession by God. Andal sings:

O dear mothers no one understands
 this disease. But do not fret.

The one dark as the deep blue ocean
 can soothe away my sickness
 with a simple caress of his hand.

He is that very one,
 who climbed the *katampa* tree on the river bank
 leapt and danced upon the crest of Kaliya
 and created such a battle scene.

Please take me to the shores of that river. (Venkatesan 181)

In the next section, *The Song of Desire*, Andal's anger, misery and fury has reached its peak. She threatens to tear out her breasts and fling them into her Beloveds chest. This image resembles Sangham poet Ilanko Adikal and his text *Cilappatikaram* where in climax episode, the heroine Kannaki, who gets angry at the king of Madurai for killing her husband, passes her vengeance on the entire city by ripping out her breast, flinging it into the city and then consigning it to high fire flames. Here, *Nacciyar Tirumozhi* derives a Sangham literary influence. Andal speaks:

I melt. I fray. But he does not care
 if I live or die
 If that stealthy thief, that duplicitous Govardhana
 should even glance at me
 I shall pluck these useless breasts of mine
 from their roots
 I will fling them at his chest
 and staunch the fire scorching me. (Venkatesan 185)

Further, breasts are the physical (bodily) metaphors of great intoxication and devotion. She threatens to rip out of her breasts to make her Beloved understand her internal

sufferings. Apart from that, she throws it to his chest and not to the ground which specifies that her mental relief gets cured only with the lovely embrace of her Lord. She continues:

What is the purpose of future penance
 if in this life, I cannot serve my Govinda
 in small familiar ways and end the anguish
 of my swollen and tender breasts?
 Let him enfold me to his perfect chest
 or let him stand before me,
 face me and bid me farewell.

I will accept even that. (Venkatesan185)

Through the lyrical composition of the whole poem, Andal makes her lord Vishnu as her only way and goal. Her unrequited love, despite of her complete reliance upon Him she was unable to sustain her life and *Nacciyar Tirumozhi* was its result. Narayana, who already knew about her love and desire further troubles her by not granting her wishes. Still, when she firmly continued to insist upon their union, the love and desire for him got matured and entered into *parama bhakti* and he finally accepted her.

As referred before, the Bhakti movement in Tamil Nadu had two streams – Alwars and Nayanars. In Karnataka, the trends were some more complicated. There was a movement working for the reformation of traditional Hinduism. Parallel to this, there was another violent energetic movement which continuously revolted against the Brahminical hegemony and the age old rituals. This movement was led by a group of a new sect called Lingayats or Veerasaivites. The founder of the movement was Basava and the movement had other famous literary figures such as Allama Prabhu, Siddharama and Akka Mahadevi.

The movement was purely against the Brahminic domination and their corruption of lower class which was purified in the names of sacred rituals and rites. A quest for equality, liberty and fraternity and the ‘unprivileged’ sections to the access of power control, economic share, social status, etc., were the major aim of Veerashaiva movement. The central aim of the movement was ‘human relationship’ and to establish this, they rejected the norms on purity and contamination between the Brahminic people and non-Brahmin ones.

A shining star of Veerashaiva movement other than Basava and Allama Prabhu is Akka Mahadevi, who lived during 12th century. She was born at Balegave in the Shimoga district of Karnataka. She lived, walked and wandered all along her life singing and spreading the vachanas. The Kannada writers who critically analysed and explained her vachanas, consider those lyrics as the most finest and pure forms of poetry in Kannada language. Also, the socio-political critics have considered Akka as a significant and powerful voice of Karnataka against the Brahminical disorders and social system. Even today, the critics consider her as one of the greatest voice of Karnataka literature along with her contemporaries such as Basava and Allama Prabhu. All of them together laid the foundation stone for the birth of Veerashaivism – the brave and heroic devotees of Lord Shiva.

Among the women writers, Akka Mahadevi always stood as a problematic figure. In the book *Sky-Clad*, Mukunda Rao describes,

Her spirituality tended to be asexual on one hand, but also appeared to be trapped in the sexual imageries of feudal and patriarchal structures on the other. This dichotomy doesn’t itself to an emancipatory cultural politics. However, a significant number of women writers and activists, who rightly recognise the powerful subversion of aesthetic categories in her poetry and her life lived in

defiance of the tradition, have no issues in seeing her as a complete rebel, who refused to conform to established social and religious norms and challenged conventional notions of sex and gender. (Rao 9)

Akka Mahadevi was such an astonishing figure who was a spiritual searcher who underwent a life-changing experience during her very initial period and achieved fulfilment and eternal salvation using her single minded devotion. She was a complete rebel of her times, who came out of the traditional framework of the society breaking every features of conventions and traditions and shaped her on pathway to achieve her goal. Her dominant actions, the radical and threatening life style along with her strong and intense vachanas fashioned several social, political and cultural revolutions. In Rao's translation, Akka sings:

Sagging breasts, untied hair
 sunken cheeks and withered arms,
 Brothers,
 why do you leer at me?
 I'm a woman who has lost
 caste and pride,
 is dead to the world
 and become a devotee.
 Fathers,
 I'm a woman who uniting with Chennamallikarjuna
 has lost status and pride. (Rao 126).

Legends about Akka say that she started worshipping Lord Shiva and displayed strong religious proclivity. There must have been a spiritual teacher for her during her early ages. She grew up as a highly determined person who fearlessly responded to the

spiritual calling. All along her adolescent ages, she spent her life preaching Shiva and composed many vachanas. According to many scholars, she was yearning for the unification with her Lord. She calls her beloved as *Chennamallikarjjuna* (Lord White as a jasmine flower). She considered herself as his wife. Her vachanas are filled with rasa and other aesthetic emotions. They are intensely classical. She writes:

Like the colour in the gold,

You were in me.

I saw in you, lord white as jasmine,

The paradox of your being

In me

Without showing a limb. (Ramanujan 119)

also,

Lord Chennamallikarjjuna

what did you find in me

that you come to abide

in the middle of my palm. (Rao 127)

Both the above quoted lines describe the themes of Bhakti and transcendence in Akka. Here, the poet describes that her Lord abides inside her palm and she can see him. This proves the transcendence of her devotion. Akka believes that Lord resides in her mind and body and therefore she is unified with him. Akka defines this in a more philosophical manner that through Bhakti, one could attain salvation and God eventually come and resides in the mind of a devotee. Her intense love for Lord Shiva can be seen in the following vachanas translated by A. K. Ramanujan:

I love the Handsome One:

he has no death
 decay nor form
 no place or side
 no end nor birthmarks,

I love him O mother, Listen. (Ramanujan 134)

The search for her lord *Chennamallikarjjuna* re-established the gentle and warm energy of her poetic genius. She explored the never ending complexities of human soul. She always wandered for more and more altitudes of imagination and never stepped back or stopped her searching with absolute brilliance and curiosity. She was quite sure of the fact that man can never be wholly satisfied or pleased through his self-discipline and understanding. An extra personal approach to the Lord is must and it lies through complete passion and the noble love that removes almost all the interruptions that the ego shapes between God and devotee.

Akka Mahadevi's spiritual personality can be examined with the societal scenario features of her age. It is quite obvious that it was her domestic context that prepared her to be a strong Shiva disciple. A study of her poetical stanzas proves that her in-depth devoutness to her Lord *Chennamallikarjjuna*, is an outcome of her sheer conditioning. Each child who was born and brought up in a Lingayat background of Karnataka, was taught to the conception of Sarana-sati and Linga-pati (the devotee herself assumes that she is at a specific mood of a modest and loving wife towards her Lord (husband)). Their wedding advocates the association of the devotee's individual soul with that of the universal consciousness (union of *Jeevatma* and *Paramatma*). A devotee attains the state of mind at the highest peak of emotion where the devotee herself becomes an egoless surrender – *sarana*. Akka Mahadevi, throughout their life

followed this concept and accepted Lord Shiva as her husband. She herself betrothed to him. She happily wrote:

Night and day

in your worship

I forget myself

O lord white as jasmine. (Ramanujan 130)

She was raised up as a young attractive damsel, like a magnificent diamond that is ignorant of its physical worthiness, she remained unconcerned to her bodily beauty.

Regardless of the condition that, the parents of Akka Mahadevi were actually Lingayat followers and therefore was absolutely aware of the Linga-pati and Sarana-pati notions still found it actually very awkward to accept their own daughter was going to accept this concept literally. The conventions of Lingayat notion, actually consider the significance of getting married as well as supports and encourages it. Leela Mullatti in her work, *The Bhakti Movement and the Status of Women* points out that:

The vachanakars looked up marriage as a key institution that should help man to enjoy all physical pleasures and worldly desires in a regulated and rational manner. According to them, more repression or rejection of these desires can never help for spiritual development and realization. (Mullatti 68)

The Veerasaivite women constantly used powerful erotic imageries in their lyrical compositions. They used these metaphors to describe their strong relation and boundless desire to unite with the supreme God, Shiva. Instead, if a man uses sexual descriptions in his lyrics, then he might primarily take on femininity as an important subject and may comprehend the desires of a feminine heart. He must then construct God as macho character. But in case of women poets, it is easier that the images, similes and metaphors of their sexual union originate certainly inside their heart and consequently they can

further simply represent their expressions of passionate desires more strikingly than any other male saint poets. This could be a chief purpose behind Akka's description of physical desires all along her compositions bearing in mind her *Chennamallikarjjuna* (Lord Shiva) as her husband.

According to Akka, her Lord *Chennamallikarjjuna* is shapeless. But in several circumstances, she defines Lord in definite and discrete forms that comes to her mind. To those who are very close to Akka, she teaches them to recognize and get familiar with Lord Shiva and at the same time asks them to inform her if they could find any definite shape for her Lord. For her unending desire for her Lord, there lies no difference between day and night, dream and reality. All along her life, she enjoys the sparks of complete Bhakti and it is this devotion that makes her unique and different from other spiritual reformers of her time. In the words of Akka, freedom or 'moksha' is always inferior to devotion. She becomes closer with her Lord when she encounters and overcomes all the hindrances on the path of devotion. To define her vachanas, they are the sayings and responses of her mind to the worldly matters and fear of survival. The poetic sense of her lyrics lies in its depth and can only be accessed with a quite serene mind filled with meditation.

Akka Mahadevi, during her whole life cherished to complete her love and affection with her 'divine' husband and not with the human one. Her saintly husband was her Lord *Chennamallikarjjuna*. All her bodily yearnings were intended at the Supreme God. At times, her poetical stanzas spoke about her carnal sublimation to the divine being. Though her imageries find enough space in explaining a bodily association with the God, it further indirectly states about the spiritual merger with the God which she constantly intended at. She wrote:

He bartered my heart,

looted my flesh,
 claimed as tribute
 my pleasure,
 took over
 all of me.

I'm the woman of love

For my lord, white as jasmine. (Ramanujan 125)

The lyrical compositions of Akka Mahadevi attempted to depict the pictures of illicit love to express her profound, passionate and all-encompassing association with Lord Shiva, her beloved. It is at this point where Akka certainly gets highly intoxicated by her madly love and therefore easily surrender herself with no other further inhibitions. She tried to use all the similes and descriptions of nature which, according to her, was permeated by her beloved. For example, she wrote:

You are the forest
 you are all the great trees
 in the forest
 you are bird and beast
 playing in and out
 of all the trees

O lord white as jasmine. (Ramanujan 122)

After the whole transferal of all her earthy love and yearnings, she consequently passes into the stage of complete transcendence. Entering into the superior height of sexual transcendence, gender variances becomes totally worthless and the saint poet, whether man or woman, regardless of their gender walks alone naked. For her, the entire world itself was a huge cage where the common people becomes occupants are categorized

into males and females. Henceforth she protests that people who only notice those dissimilarities seen in the external gender however the self/soul that exists inside of a human being is neither of a man nor of a woman. Consequently, she strongly queries to the macho world that why are they watching at her sagging breasts and untied long thick hair. She questions why they stare at her physical body.

In spite of being uncommon, male nakedness may have not aroused such higher controversies that female nudity did. Akka Mahadevi walked naked with her thick long black hair covering her nakedness. When questioned about her nudity, she replied:

You can confiscate
 money in hand;
 can you confiscate
 the body's glory? (Ramanujan 122)

Akka Mahadevi explains that human sexual body is not just an ordinary substance, rather it is a strong social paradigm, a cultural illustration which is clearly fashioned by the human society. According to the religious treatises, a human physical body is something inherently imperfect, contaminated, diseased, transient, which is considered as the prison of the soul - the soul that is clean, perfect and superior. These discourses further adds that body is also an embodiment of carnal 'corruptions' and disruptions, an obstruction to one's transcendent development. Such notions delivered by the religious treatises expanded and societies easily start believing those notions that the human body is something contaminated, opposing to the hygienic soul and minor to the human mind. They considered it as an enemy which is to be controlled, disciplined and defeated. Such wrong perceptions about human body have caused in losing its intelligence, strengths and natural instincts. Saint poets like Akka tried to defeat these notions and announced that human body is not an obstruction or inferior to the human psyche. In contrast, it is a

perfect abode of human intellect, knowledge, love, imagination, enlightenment and so on. It is the human consciousness occupied with different emotions and ardent intelligence that delivers the opening for this possibility. Here comes the significance of poets like Akka Mahadevi. They found the intellect of questioning one's binary mind, surrendering themselves by giving up all efforts, and hence the powers in the body gets accelerate and brings the transcendence. Consequently the scheme of controlling human body aimed at constructing 'socially acceptable values' were strongly opposed.

According to Akka, her body was not at all a liability for her and she found utmost happiness in the celebration of her body. For her, body was the strongest tool to directly express her mental emotions and yearnings. She wisely realized the significance of her body and found it expressed in her verses. Hence, she never wanted to discharge from every hindrances of expressing her feminine body, but rather she walked out in nakedness, in defiance of all social norms, and ultimately moved beyond all binaries, comprising male-female, and devotee-God. Mukunda Rao in his book *Sky-Clad: The Extra Ordinary Life and Times of Akka Mahadevi* points out that:

It is in the state of separation which is felt intensely and acutely by bhaktas – hence agony, also the urge to transcend the separation – that bhaktas, especially women bhaktas, deploy imageries of love, forlornness and sex. These convey their deep urge to overcome the agony of separation and transcend the divisive consciousness. (Rao 95)

The experiences of Akka Mahadevi can also be directly associated with Bridal Mysticism (*Madhurya Bhava*). But here, the rightfulness of the experience turns irrelevant. The beloved may not be a husband itself rather, he could be an adulterous lover who passionately loves her. The way how Akka handled her sexuality is much different than how Andal defined herself and waited for the marriage with her Lord. It is

further similar to that of a *devadasi*, than that of a dutiful consort. In Rao's translation, she writes:

For hunger, there is the town's rice

in the begging bowl.

For thirst, there are tanks, streams, wells.

For sleep, there are ruins of temples.

For soul's company

I have you, O Lord. (Rao 123)

All along her stanzas Akka yearns and craves for him to make her Lord, her eternal beloved lover or husband. A real fight might be taking inside her mind. She could be haunted with deep pain of longingness as well as separation.

She describes herself as 'a shameless girl'. She asks to the patriarchal society:

O brothers, why do you talk

to this woman,

hair loose,

face withered,

body shrunk?

O fathers, why do you bother

with this woman?

she has no strength of limb,

has lost the world,

lost power of will,

turned devotee,

she has laid down,

with the Lord, white as jasmine,

and has lost caste. (Ramanujan 135)

Akka, in a conversation with Allama Prabhu replied that one cannot confiscate other's glory of their physical body like money or other material wealth. Clothes can be stripped off, but nakedness cannot. In her lyrics, she wrote:

To the shameless girl
wearing white jasmine Lord's
light of morning,
you fool

where's the need for cover and jewel? (Ramanujan 139)

According to Mahdeviyakka, her physical body was not a limitation to her act of consummation with her beloved. To her, it was the 'gendered' physical body that stood as a chief societal hindrance, a social conditioning, or a superimposition, which is polluted. Hence it must be cleansed to travel into the outside world of opposites and along with that, all other dishonest appearances of the mind is healed from all contaminants, and therefore there is no more space for the pollution of human body.

Akka Mahadevi was an amazingly drastic personality who dismissed all the societal norms and conditions of the period. She left her husband, family and all her personal bindings with the material world only to attain salvation and unite with her beloved. Therefore her verses always consists of her deep and passionate affection for her Lord who she lovingly call as *Chennamallikarjuna*.

It is said that she took part in many spiritual discourses with her contemporaries such as Basava and Allama Prabhu. Most of the time, the core of the subject will be focused on religious philosophy and the need of ways for attaining spiritual enlightenment/salvation. Even though she selected a mystical life style and wandered all along her life, she was critically questioned several times for her nakedness as a woman,

even though such a condition was normally acceptable for a male saint. During those medieval days, her non-conventional and non-conformist ways of lifestyle was always a matter of debate and they only started to accept her high religious passion, a kind of rigorous devotion, and her mental strength that she possessed all the way along her spiritual life.

She was only just sixteen years old when she challenged the – then existing societal conditions of marriage and family. She happily removed all the codes and norms of conventional society, including her personal attire and walked naked. She courageously asks through her vachana:

People
male and female,
blush when a cloth covering their shame
comes loose.

When the lord of lives
lives drowned without a face
in the world, how can you be modest?

When all the world is the eye of the lord,
onlooking everywhere, what can you
Cover and conceal? (Ramanujan 131)

Though her love is divine, the vachanas often transgress the boundaries of divinity and tend to be human, and even carnal (Pillai 90). At the same time, her verses reflect the emptiness of samsaric life and always pleads for a spiritual transcendence.

During those periods, the nudity of a male was well accepted (even today) by the society whereas the nudity of a female was a complete taboo. Because of this condition the social status and life style of a man was well recognized and he had the ultimate

freedom to choose his life. Whether live as a sage (sadhu/sanyasi), should have long hair and beard or else want to be clean shaved, should live as a householder or as an earning member and so on. But women never enjoyed such a complete freedom to choose their way of life. A nude woman walking over the street was considered as abnormal, pervert or else as a hazard to the society. It was in this backdrop, Akka Mahadevi lived as a nude and wandered as a nude and lived her life entirely as an exceptional and unique personality.

She was never a teacher to any of her disciples and never cared for any rites and rituals of the tradition. Like her contemporary Allama Prabhu she was never a firm believer in ‘Ashtavarna’ (the eight spiritual coverings namely Guru, Linga, Jangama, Padodaka, Prasada, Vibhuti, Rudraksha and Mantra) nor a disciple of Shatsthala doctrine. For her, “Bhakti was the path, her inner voice the guru and, she promptly moved from bhakti to arivu – awareness that all is one” (Rao 68). She never believed in following a particular path other Veerasaivites. She had no any special principles, phases or degrees to reach and achieve progress. She went through all the ways that her heart asked her to go and explore. She with utmost love and devotion to her Lord, walked all along the ways single-mindedly discharging all the ‘unwanted’. She walked from a Saguna Brahmin to a Nirguna Brahmin.

Riding the blue sapphire mountains

wearing moonstone for slippers

blowing long horns

O Shiva

when shall I

crush you on my pitcher breasts

O lord white as jasmine

when do I join you

stripped of body's shame

And heart's modesty? (Ramanujan 317)

The concluding lines of the above vachanas are the best examples of depicting strong sexual imageries in vachanas. This indirectly points out the intense longing of Akka for the mystical union with her *Chennamallikarjuna*. Here, in the method of Bhakti, the physical experience of her human body is indirectly joined with the transcendental. So the soul of the person speaks through his flesh. Rao explains:

The body, as Akka would say, is not only the 'house of passion' but also the 'home' of the Divine. So the physical continuous to be the base, even when, at some point during this journey, her Lord Chennamallikarjuna, with 'white teeth' and 'matted curls', metamorphoses into Nirguna, or the aniconic one, who has no attributes; and finally, into the nirakara, one with no name or form. (Rao 13)

Another important feature that is discussed with this is the presence of Bridal Mysticism in the works of Akka Mahadevi. She, as similar to the legend of Andal felt that she is the prime consort of her beloved *Chennamallikarjuna*. Her 'earthly' husband was only a choice of societal norms (whom she left later) and her real spouse was her Lord Shiva – the lord of the peaks. She happily writes about her wedding:

Decorating the canopy with emerald and gold,

the column with diamond and rubies,

they performed my wedding

Our people performed my wedding

Tying the sacred thread around my wrist

Showering holy grains

they married me to Chennamallikarjuna. (Rao 19)

Here, Akka with great pleasure and happiness describes her wedding with her Lord. She depicts all the rites and happily joins hands with her beloved. As it is the wedding with her Lord and as the groom is from the mystical heaven, the canopy is entirely decorated with gold and emeralds and the columns with precious rubies and diamonds. The bride here is in a stage of utmost happiness.

Here, the poet describes the theme of Bridal Mysticism. Such a concept is not only linked with female bhaktas. Sometimes in several verses of male saint poets, one could find Bridal Mysticism where the poet carefully considers themselves as the female (bride) and God as the male (groom). In the divine province, the feminine section portrays the perfect embodiment of love and the perfect surrender to the Lord. “In Bhakti culture or spirituality, the sense of separation from the Divine or, say, duality or divisive consciousness, is portrayed as viraha, the separation of the woman from her beloved” (Rao 19-20). This is sometimes referred to as Nayaka-Nayika love where the individual or the soul, the Jeevatma takes the feminine form and the Paramatma, the Supreme reality takes masculine gender.

She composed several vachanas – the vachanas of her agony and despair – where she lived as an earthly wife to Kaushika and managed all the inescapable wifely duties, even though she was intensely yearning for her beloved.

Husband inside, lover outside

I can't manage them both

This world and that other,

Cannot manage them both.

O Lord Chennamallikarjuna,

I cannot hold in one hand

Both the round nut and the long bow. (Rao 23)

Here it can be easily described that this union with her earthly husband might be a drastic bad dream for Akka and her inner soul might have definitely looked and searched for her beloved. A family life is never regarded as opposed to or antithetic to spirituality.

Legends of Veerasaivism mentions around sixty female saints lived during 12th century in Kalyana and the nearby locations. Vachanas of almost thirty saranes have been found. Among them, twelve of them were from the lower class and eight were unmarried. All of them certainly points out that under the new spiritual atmosphere of Veerasaivism, women strongly broke the age old convictions of tradition and found new pathways equivalent to that of men.

The emergence and empowerment can be easily witnessed by their refusal of five types of pollution (*pancha sutaka*) – pollution at the time of menstruation, pollution by caste, pollution during child birth, being in a widow state and finally death. All these were strictly imposed on women by the thoughts and ideologies of Brahminism. These women saints created lyrics that were straight and fiery like an arrow pointing to its target. Into this phase, Akka fearlessly arrived and fought for her philosophies. Mukunda Rao explains this as:

Into this staggeringly complex, revolutionary yet mystical, world of saranas and saranes, walking naked, trudging hundreds of kilometres from Uduthadi, through forest and no man's land, through villages and towns, Akka Mahadevi arrives in Kalyana. She comes to meet Allama Prabhu, Basavanna and other saranes, and takes Kalyana by storm. It is startlingly illuminating chapter in the history of twelfth-century Shiva saranas – indeed in the annals of Indian spiritual narratives – that is hardly known outside of Karnataka. But within the state, there has been considerable study of her life and vachanas, and her incredible story continuous

to be passionately narrated, discussed and debated by feminists and writers, activists and spiritual leaders to this day (Rao 47-48).

From this analysis it is evident that the presence of body in the lyrical compositions of Akka Mahadevi act as a powerful metaphor and a synonym of resistance. There is a clear distinction between the deity's body and the devotee's body, yet there is a craving for togetherness. One may locate this as a philosophical/ spiritual unification with the idea of God. Still, there is immense possibility of reading the text as a powerful resistance against the patriarchal society. It is to be noted that Indian feminist writing is not an offshoot of the Western academic discourse on feminisms and female body, as writers such as Akka Mahadevi had used several powerful imageries of body even during the medieval era.

Chapter 4

Body and Beyond: An Analysis of Later Bhakti Poets—Lal Ded and Mirabai

Literature has always performed as a significant cause for the conversion stretching from individual and communal and then to the literary realm. Poetry, as an important literary genre has also worked at multiple levels for various purposes. For some people, it intended at the spiritual conversion in the sacred formula, whereas for others it served as a strong podium for individual manifestation of emotions and feelings. Some others used poetry as a means to teaching technique, while for some others it was an automobile for guiding a revolution at the world and transforming the same. It has continuously comprehended within its dominion approximately all facets of human life-its worries, outlooks and longings. Poetry existed in the procedure of folktales delivered from one generation to other either verbally or using the customs of sacred teachings or songs. This chapter aims at exploring the use of poetry as a means of expressing love and emotions to the conservative world by two medieval Indian mystic women poets, Lalleshwari/Lal Ded and Mirabai. Both these poets belong to two diverse cultures, diverse sensibilities and diverse ethnicities. But the mutual thread found between the two is their mystically emotional poetic sensibility.

The medieval India witnessed various growths in the areas of arts and literature. It has substantial literary output which later paved way for the development of modern and contemporary literature. As already discussed about two significant South Indian poets Andal and Akka Mahadevi in the previous chapter and their modes of Bhakti, this chapter deals with Lal Ded and Mirabai, two later mystic poets from North India.

In a period of great turmoil and intolerance in the valleys of Kashmir, a woman mystic appeared to sing and praise the *vakhs* (songs) of God and spread harmony and peace. Kashmir valleys of medieval days had a great influence of Sufism. But, Lal Ded endeared herself to both Muslim and Hindu communities. P. Govinda Pillai in his book *The Bhakti Movement: Renaissance or Revivalism* points out that:

As in the case of Kabir Das, upon her death, her Hindu and Muslim admirers claimed the body for the right to conduct the funeral rites according to their respective rituals and customs. Even her name was altered to suit the tastes of each community. The name her parents gave was Padmavathi. However, after she left her parent's home to be a wandering minstrel and apostle, Hindus called her Lalla and Muslims addressed her as Lalla Arifa. In due course, all her admirers and worshipers affectionately called her Lal Ded-meaning 'Lal the Mother'. (170-171)

The stories about the childhood and formative years of Lal Ded are also wrapped in myths and legends as like other medieval mystic poets. Too many details are still matters of great controversy. The general consensus suggests that she was born in AD 1335 to a Hindu Pundit family near Srinagar. She was earlier attracted to Trika Saivism and was married at the age of twelve into a rich Pundit family. Myths suggest that her mother-in-law was not very happy with her behaviors of independent views and lifestyle rather than being a 'modest and submissive' homemaker. Unable to bear the atrocities in her husband's family, she walked out of the home, leaving her graceless marriage, without even caring about her clothes, ornaments and other personal belongings and accepted a homeless life. She wandered all along through the valleys of Kashmir, lived in forests and appeared on streets and pavements with beggars and mendicants. This strange life of Lal Ded resembled that of Akka Mahadevi. Soon, several followers

including both Hindus and Muslims accompanied her and they formed a sect. (Pillai 171-172) Lal Ded sings:

My master gave me just one rule

Forget the outside, get to the inside of things.

I, Lalla, took that teaching to the heart.

From that day, I've danced naked. (Hoskote 97)

Legends say that she went forth confidently naked, singing her *vakhs* happily, dancing on the roads with utmost pleasure. The guru might be her Lord. Generally, as per Hindu Bhakti movement history Lal Ded is considered as an ardent devotee of Lord Shiva (Saivite) and hence included in the Kashmir Saivism.

The way she renders her *vakhs* makes her different from other mystic poets. They are in the form of teachings from a guru. When other poets like Andal, Akka Mahadevi, Mirabai, Gangasati or Bahinabai sang glorious devotional songs containing socio-political messages melodically making them beautiful outpourings of pure *Madhurya Bhakti*/Bridal Mysticism, Lal Ded's lyrics (*vakhs*) carried moral messages for harmony and peace among those people who were always obsessed with religious and casteist conflicts. Her lyrics were not devotional melodies, but religious and socio-political teachings. They were simple and therefore meant for even illiterate people. Occasionally, those verses raised philosophical and metaphysical questions. Like her predecessors, human physical body and desires were a strong subject matter to Lal Ded too. Andrew Schelling in his book *Love and the Turning Seasons* points out that:

One Muslim chronicler says she danced in ecstasy "like the Hebrew *nabis* of the old and more recent Dervishes." Islamic writers chronicles her encounters with

their holy men, while Hindu texts tell of gurus. The Kashmir of her day held Buddhists, Nath yogins, Brahman teachers and Sufis and Tantric adepts. She may have learned something from each of them, still, she seem to have considered herself a dedicated Saivite yogini (practitioner dedicated to Shiva); tales of insight and supernatural power surpassing that of her instructors began to circulate. (Schelling 90)

Her lyrics dealt with peace and harmony. In fact, as said earlier, they were teachings to a torn society of unnecessary turmoil and intolerance. Her teachings were from her heart; from her soul. Hence, human physical body and beyond body became a recurring constituent for her *vakhs*. Even the term 'I', symbolized body, negating body and hence negating human egos. She never tried to negate physical body, but travels beyond body. According to her, the emptiness of the body appealed more to her rather than the bodily flesh. Therefore, her lyrics became physical as well as metaphysical. Lal Ded, through her lyrics tries to convey that soul fills the vacuum of the body and hence a completeness is attained. Like light and darkness, there always lies a conflict between spirituality and consumerism – emptiness and consumerism. For Lal Ded, writing about physical body is not just an expression of bodily desire but it travels long beyond the physical existence of body to a high spiritual level. It is the confused soul of man that is always searching for God. He/She repeatedly questions the social rites and rituals. When he/she enters the stage of enlightenment the soul is set free and attain ultimate happiness. Here, man is set free from his social, political, religious and cultural traumas of the outside world and gain pure salvation. This happiness led to go beyond senses. Lal Ded, at this point, dances with her soul. She sings:

I gave myself to him, body and soul,

became a bell that the clear note of Him range through.

Thoughts fixed on Him, I flew through the sky

and unlocked the mysteries of heaven and hell. (Hoskote 114)

The above verses of Lal Ded expose that she was a woman who was aware of her personal desires, emotions, feelings and thoughts. With all these personal spirits she finds happiness in submitting herself to the Lord. She suffered from severe prosecutions and pains owing to her transgressing mental psyche but still stood firm in her body and soul and stayed unaffected by the worldly sentiments. She intelligently managed to deal the myths about heaven and hell. She was a brave woman who was aware of the social conditions of her period and courageously used it for rising above the same. She could only use her firm belief in her God to move forward successfully.

Lal Ded's lyrical quality in her stanzas transitions from that of an intelligent hermit to an analyst, to a pastor to an intense yearning lover to that of a proficient yogini who has already achieved the stage of eternal delight. Therefore her lyrics are the straight expressions of her insightful spiritual understandings, skills of being a brave yogini who was skilled in the arduous religious segments and spiritual performances of Kashmir Saivism. Also, she was exposed to the notions and pictures of the other customs and traditions that were predominant during her days. Ranjit Hoskote in the Introduction to his book *I, Lalla: the Poems of Lal Ded* points out:

Lalla's poems shimmer with their author's experience of being a yogini, trained in demanding spiritual disciplines and devotional practices of Kashmir Saivite mysticism. Since this school is itself the confluential outcome of an engagement with several philosophical traditions, she was receptive to the images and ideas of those other traditions. It would be most productive to view her as a figure

whose ideas straddled the domains of Kashmir Saivism, Tantra, Yoga and Yogacara Buddhism, and who appears to have been socially acquainted with the ideas and practices of the Sufis. (xix)

Acknowledgement or “*pratyabhijna*” is a significant experience of transformation in the principles Kashmir Saivism. Since she was influenced by the Saivite tradition of Kashmir valleys, it appears in her lyrics. She sings:

Lord! I’ve never known who I really am, or You.

I threw my love away on this lousy carcass

and never figured it out: You’re me, I’m You.

All I ever did was doubt: Who am I? Who are You? (Hoskote 27)

Lal Ded, in the above lines, herself regrets for being blinded by the body-centred perceptions and suspecting the exact nature of the God and of the self as she differentiates both. In other words, she is her own chastiser for concentrating too much on the physical body and personal individuality. But later she achieved the high stage of recognition of unity of seeker and the target, of the self and the Self and substantiates passionate authentications of her understandings.

Wrapped up in Yourself, You hid from me.

All day I looked for You

and when I found You hiding inside me,

I ran wild, playing now me, now You. (Hoskote 17)

The above lines specify the metaphor of ‘lila’ This is a term mentioned in Sanskrit to indicate the hide and seek game between the God and the devotee. In Lal ded’s verses,

the physical body occupies primary significance because it is the centre to all her experiments in self-refinement. According to her, the symbolic and the sensuously distinguishable are never contrary but instruct each other. This game is pensive as well as euphoric where the Self and the other Self understands the oneness in two. Therefore this transgress later into complete ecstasy where the devotee unifies with the lord. According to Lal Ded, the individual self and the universal Self are actually same but the materialistic desires of man and the deceptive character of the outer world always work as hindrances to this supreme consciousness. Lal Ded says:

Who sees Self as Other, Other as Self,
 who sees day as night, night as day,
 whose mind does not dance between opposites,
 he alone has seen the Teacher
 who is first among Gods.

Lal Ded's situation was very worse during her days as she was a female saint who left her domestic bonds. The society floats insults against her which she suffered silently but still faced the atrocities boldly and kept herself strong and immune to their curses. Lal Ded says:

They lash me with insults, serenade me with curses.
 Their barking means nothing to me.
 Even if they came with soul-flowers to offer,
 I couldn't care less. Untouched, I move on. (Hoskote 94)

She faced all the pains and found pleasure in devoting her Lord. She moved beyond them and always had the realization that, “I belong to Siva” (Hoskote 95). Moreover, Lal Ded explains that her spirit is now enlightened and has developed into a clear mirror that is conscious of the lord’s existence. The mirror shines more and more in accordance with the worries and troubles she faces. It shows her intense faith and love in her lord. She finds herself protected by Lord Shiva, with whom she reaches into her ecstasy. Lal Ded declares:

Let them hurl a thousand curses at me,

Pain finds no purchase in my heart.

I belong to Siva. Can a scatter of ashes

Ruin a mirror? It gleams. (Hoskote 95)

Lal Ded illustrated human love all along her verses. Those *vakhs* showcased misery and aversion as the consequences of an unfair world, of a biased culture and prejudiced civilisation. Lal Ded protested against ostentation, treachery, injustice and wished for autonomy from material desires of the world. The dilemmas suffered by virtuous people and deprived folks were visible to her. Through her lyrics, she submits herself to her Lord so that she will be deprived of all the material desires. There arises philosophical cravings in her *vakhs*, where she wishes to join with her lord. Lal Ded sings:

As the moonlight faded, I called out to the mad women

eased her pain with the love of god.

‘It’s Lalla, it’s Lalla,’ I cried, waking up the Loved one.

I mixed with Him and drowned in a crystal lake. (Hoskote 49)

She plays with various personae: Lal Ded is the mad woman. Also, she is the one who brings ease to the madwoman with intense love of Lord. The Self is the loved one. She wishes to wake up and join with Him. Hoskote describes it as, “this process of union marks the falling away of all karmic defilements and the attainment of an indescribable clarity of being”.

Lal Ded in one of her poems happily declares that her Lord is the one who shelters her from all the worldly miseries. Her intense love, dedication and desire to join with Him makes her forget all her sorrows. By happily submitting her body and soul to her Lord, she finds extreme happiness. The stage of trance or enlightenment happens when the devotee submits herself and the soul travels beyond the body. There the devotee finds pure reconciliation. She herself addresses her as a bell that rang when the Lord’s notes ran through her. Lal Ded sings:

I gave myself to Him, body and soul,
became a bell that the clear note of Him rang through.

Thoughts fixed on Him, I flew through the sky

An unlocked the mysteries of heaven and hell. (Hoskote 114)

She finds satisfaction in the purification of physical body. She compares her body with that of an ocean where new moon purifies and refines a static ocean each time. These lines symbolizes Lal Ded’s belief in the existence of physical body and resembles that of Andal’s *pavai nombu* of *Margali* month where the maidens bath early morning to worship Lord Krishna, their eternal lover. Lal Ded says:

New mind, New moon.

I’ve seen the great ocean made new.

Ever since I've scouted my body and mind,

I, Lalla, have been as new as new can be! (Hoskote 119)

Lal Ded also mentions about the existence of physical body in several other verses too. The analysis of these lyrics substantiates her belief in physical body and how the body gets transformed into metaphysical state where the devotee reaches complete trance. She never negates body but has faith in it. Actually, her *vakhs* explains how the individual Self travels from a physical body and reaches into ecstasy state to merge with the universal self. She uses material images, similes and metaphors to justify her teachings. The supreme idea present is how universal love is formed using devotion. Physical body becomes a major tool in describing the transformation of human soul. Lal Ded says:

True mind, look inside the body,

this body they call the Self's own form.

Strip off greed and lust, polish this body,

this body as bright as the sun. (Hoskote 143)

Lal Ded, at times, is found trapped in between life and death. The ambiguity about the quest of Self always worried her. Sometimes, she ends her lyrics with this ambiguity about life beyond body. For example, Lal Ded says:

I pestled my heart in love's mortar,

roasted it and ate it up.

I kept you cool but you can bet I wasn't sure

whether I'd live or die. (Hoskote 52)

Here, in the above lines, Lal Ded narrates in a more vigorous way about how she pestles her heart in the mortar of love, then roasted it and ate. The love for the Divine quickly overflows and attains a very productive restraint over desire. But still, Lal Ded storms over a great doubt. Even after the Self sacrifices itself at the altar of the Self, can the questor live or die. This indirectly ponders that whether her life would continue same as before or whether it would get completely transformed. The power of love and the transformation of Self is explained here.

Lal Ded describes the unification of Self powerfully in another verse, pointing out the visual images of Shiva and Shakti, that could indirectly denotes the *Ardhanareeshara* thought of Saivism. According to Hindu mythology, it is from Lord Shiva, the universe begins and the extreme form of man-woman love is portrayed using the metaphor of *Ardhanareeshara* image. Lal Ded describes:

I, Lalla, came through the gate of my soul's jasmine garden

And found Siva and Shakti there, locked in love!

Drunk with joy, I threw myself into the lake of nectar.

Who cares if I'm dead woman walking! (Hoskote 70)

It is one of the most beautiful verses of Lal Ded. It is highly sensuous and carries extreme devotion to the lord and embraces Him with wild passion. Here, the love of the devotee does not surrender but emancipates and overflows. Her image enters with fragrance and beauty of jasmine flowers. The opening lines bring a visual treat, which is not so common in Lal Ded. The combined images of Shiva and Shakti denotes of sexual union with lord. She overcomes every obstacle in her pathway and then enters into a state of supreme transcendence, which found space in the principles of Tantric philosophy. Her body passes beyond the physical state of life and death and reaches into

a large lake filled with sweet nectar. This indicates that Lal Ded entered into ecstasy. The divine coupling of Shiva and Shakti is a sacred symbol in Tantric culture. Lal Ded also explains the existence of physical body in connection with Lord Shiva in other verses too. For example, she says:

He who strikes the Unstruck sound
 calls space his body and emptiness his home,
 who has neither name, nor colour, nor family, nor form,
 who, meditating on Himself, is both source and sound
 is the god who shall mount and ride his horse. (Hoskote 80)

For Lal Ded, Lord Shiva is a supreme manifestation of the Supreme. He is compared to a horse who rides into enlightenment. He is the one who controls the entire universe. In the above verses, the Self of the devotee rises within the Self of the Lord. His body is space and His home is a mystical void. He is never constrained by any binaries or worldly obstacles. Lal Ded declares Him as 'both source and sound'. This resembles that of Kashmir Saivism where the Supreme Being resides within one's refined body as energy. When the devotee is dipped in extreme devotion, the initial state of enlightenment occurs and the devotee receives blessings (source). This, transformation awakens as a primal cry (sound). The metaphysical stage of body is manifested by Lal Ded. The significance of any rites or rituals is explained where-devotee's truthful mind set in perfect devotion is relevant. The emptiness of body gains significance rather than bodily flesh.

While explaining about the significance of metaphysical body she never negates the existence of physical bodies. She explains physical bodies as material images which

communicates universal truths. It is the physical body that contains ego, jealousy, gluttony etc., they are the part of consumerism. It is only by describing the nature and existence of physical body one can define the significance of body beyond physical (metaphysical). The intense love of devotion begins with physical body and reaches ecstasy with metaphysical state. Lal Ded describes the instability and inconsistency of physical body as:

This body that you're fussing over
 this body that you're dolling up,
 this body that you're wearing to the party,
 this body will end as ash. (Hoskote 142)

Lal Ded describes that physical body is perishable in all ways. In Hoskote's words, "Lalla deplores the obsession with the body as an obsession of the doomed and futile vanity. This poem has the ring of meditation intended to guide the aspirant beyond normal". (231) It travels beyond the physical body centred psyche, and later on passes beyond the deceptions on the stability of physical body, its internal desires, cravings, peculiarities etc. This mortality regarding human physical body is well explained in other religious and cultural traditions. For example, the Tantrayana meditation on human skull, the Aghora Saivite devotees who worship on cemeteries, Catholic practice of contemplation on ossuary etc. The idea further explains the instability of physical existence in the mortal world and travelling beyond the body and bodily senses.

Lal Ded, searches for her lord as a wanderer or questor. Her lyrics are sometimes purely personal where she is the central character. She says:

I, Lalla, wore myself down searching for Him

and found a strength after my strength had died.

I came to His threshold but found the door bolted.

I locked the door with my eyes and looked at Him. (Hoskote 13)

In the above lines, Lal Ded is a wanderer. But, her quest became vain and the door was closed before her. But, at the end, she found a large pool of energy whose existence she was ignorant till then. This is a common situation mystics face, similar to that of athletes. In another way, Lal Ded here becomes an athlete of self-overcoming. The language she used is spiritual, but the meaning it conveys is the travel of her body. She focuses on her intense love towards Him, cleansed and strengthened by her stubborn nature and endurance on her Lord, she continues her quest by singing:

Love-mad, I, Lalla, started out,

spent days and nights on the trail.

Circling back, I found the teacher in my own house.

What brilliant luck, I said, and hugged him. (Hoskote 15)

The passionate quest of Lal Ded to meet her eternal Lord continues in the above lines. She describes herself as a mad lover. But she experiences a curve at the end. She wanders all along in search of the field of experience but unluckily returns home – the place of her Self. At home, she found her teacher; what she thought would find in the outer world. A great distance became a matter of intimate proximity. The Lord is within one's Self. The unification with Him takes place when the Self of the physical body unites with the universal Self. The realisation regarding the identity of Self and Self must be attained through the path of devotion. Lal Ded should look within herself, not outside.

Sometimes Lal Ded's verses becomes sensuous and melancholic. A deep serenity arises in her verses that depicts the feelings of an innocent lover who feels the grief of separation from her beloved. Lal Ded sings:

Royal swan, what happened to your beautiful face?

Someone's robbed you and you can't even say who or what.

The mill's stopped grinding, its mouth looked choked

and where's the grain? The miller's got clean away! (Hoskote 23)

Here, the thief who robbed the voice and the disappeared miller are one, the Divine power.

Lal Ded's verses gleam with her personal experiences of being a mystic rebel who is perfectly trained in the disciplines and doctrines of Kashmir Saivism. Since, the Saivite school of Kashmir itself was an outcome of several other religious and cultural outcomes, Lal Ded was also connected with the imageries and ideologies of other civilisations. These include Kashmir Saivism, Yoga culture, Tantric beliefs, Yogacara Buddhism and the Sufi practices related to Islam. In the Introduction to the book *I, Lalla: The Poems of Lal Ded*, Ranjit Hoskote explains:

Revelation comes to Lalla like a moon flowering in dark water. Her symbols and allegories can be cryptic, and yet the candour of her poems moves us deeply, viscerally. She celebrates perseverance in the quest, contrasting physical agony with spiritual flight and dwelling on the obdurate landscapes that the questor must negotiate. Lal Ded's poetry is fortified by a palpable first-hand experience of illumination; it conveys a freedom from the mortal fright of fear and vacillation. (Hoskote xix-xx)

Lal Ded's *vakhs* carries her inner consciousness of mortal life and the body beyond worldly existence. Those verses demonstrate about the raw sides of mortal life – of ego and jealousy that occupies human mind. These are produced from the unending material needs of man which is built upon consumerism. Lal Ded is fighting against this consumerist culture using spirituality. The concepts of metaphysical bodies and the levels after philosophical cravings underscores the major themes of her verses. Her writing of the body is not just expressing her physical desires and cravings, but mentioning about the 'body beyond body'.

Lal Ded advocated that the only method to connect to the Divine spirit (that has in it everything for universe) is to give up the physical desires entirely i.e., he/she must surrender their physical body and meditate consciously to accept the metaphysical stage of body. She supported a whole bodied life. It is only through the use of physical body and the bodily senses that man can experience anything on the world. Hence, the physical body need to be purified, protected and nourished with great care. The Supreme Being of Lal Ded's *vakhs* indirectly denotes Lord Shiva. According to Hindu legends Shiva is actually formless and has no beginning or end. This image can be easily connected with the formless God of Quran. People sense insights in her views and could find mysticism only when they study to unlearn the different conducts of the material world and look within. As god is the part of every animate as well as inanimate creatures, He becomes a part of humans. We need to look inside rather than search outside. Ranjit Hoskote tried to include these necessary elements of Lal Ded.

The physical world is considered as a home where knowledge and aptitudes cannot protect man from the wrenches of death and their personal sorrows. Those people who do not value any obligations or receive any deserving accolades are more and more admired and attain every basic amenity. This inequality was severe in the society and

this later became a subject of sorrow, agony and pain for Lal Ded. She described her experiences directly using her verses and thereby making them free and hence, spreading consciousness. Lal Ded educated individuals to grow above the deceptive world and attain the actual understanding of matters. Lal Ded says:

I, Lalla, set out to bloom like a cotton flower

The cleaner tore me, the carder shredded me on his bow.

The gossamer: that was I

the spinning woman lifted from her wheel.

At the weaver's, they hung me out on the loom. (Hoskote 40)

Lal Ded's poems communicate that she was a strong woman aware of her personal desires, emotional feelings and intellect thoughts. Still, she suffered many trials and pains because of her transgressing soul but stood sturdy in her physical body and spirit by continuing modest by the public attitudes. In the above *vakh*, Lal Ded portrays her coming to the material world as a beautiful flower filled with eagerness, potential and several other possibilities but upon getting harder setbacks from the people. Lal Ded felt an internal need to outdo the generally allocated roles of common man. She compares herself purifying her with rubbing a piece of cloth and dashing it on a stone slab to wash out the dirt in it. Her worldly identity and Self is washed off. The washerman in this stanza recounts to the self that exists within her, that desires to touch the Supreme Being and therefore involves in actions which permitted Lal Ded to rise above her ordinary feminine self. Every bit of the torn cloth represents the shred personality of Lal Ded and makes her true identity to rise up. Lal Ded as a lovely daughter, Lal Ded as a submissive daughter-in-law and Lal Ded as a dutiful wife, all these split characters left hold of her life and she arose as a powerful woman unconditionally refusing to confine

to the socio-culturally established means of feminine behaviours. Consequently, her teachings, deeds and experiences encouraged many other women of North to enter into the sphere of love and mysticism. The most noteworthy among these poets is Mirabai of Rajasthan.

Mira is considered as the most celebrated female mystic poet of India. Her verses (*padas*) are sung in the vernacular languages of the places where she lived like, Marwari, Gujarati and Rajasthani. Her verses always portrayed the epitome of *prema bhakti* and are still recognised as classics in the area of Indian devotional literature. By virtue of her extreme devotion and supreme faith in her lover and singing his songs melodiously, Mira has made herself everlasting to many generations of Vaishnava (Krishna) devotees. Her songs easily convert a devotee into the mood of perfect transcendental bliss. They exemplify the cry of a devotee from the soul, lamenting, with intense yearning of true love, to hug eternity. She was born in Rajasthan at a time of the golden age of Hindi poetry. Kabirdas, Surdas, Tulsidas, Jayasi and Malik Mohammed were some of her contemporaries. The stories Bhagavata Purana resulted in the incarnation of Lord Vishnu, in the form of Krishna. Like Kabir, Tulsidas and Surdas, Mira also developed a devotional intimation towards Lord Krishna, who she considered as her beloved lover.

Mira is recognised as a pole star on the horizon of supreme devotion who sang songs of eternal love for her beloved lover, Lord Krishna. These songs still remain unparalleled in the realm of Bhakti cult. The name 'Mira' itself has later become identical with the feeling of true devotion. Many scholars had interpreted her name in different ways. For some critics, 'Mira' articulates the spirit of her illumined mystic life style. In different Indian languages the name 'Mira' has different meanings. In Hindi 'Mira' means 'light' whereas in Sanskrit 'mir' means 'ocean'; in Rajasthani dialect the

name has its roots in the word Mera, meaning a bumper-harvest. Light, Ocean or Harvest – three of them shows richness and prosperity. The light she brought into the lives of many ardent devotees gleams with full spirit and her songs still enthrals the hearts of many devotees. Mira was an ocean filled with supreme love towards her lord: the love towards immortality. Also, the entire life of Mira was a rich harvest season of sheer devotion.

The birth and childhood of Mira has been calculated using several folklore and tales related with her. It is estimated that she was born around 1498 as a Rajput princess in Rajasthan. The legends about Mira says that during her childhood, she was gifted an idol of Lord Krishna by a wandering mendicant. She developed love for Him at the age of five, when her mother answered to one of her questions that Giridhara Gopala is her groom. But, her destiny made her to marry King Bhojraj. With the sudden death of her husband and the compulsion from her in laws to practise the widow duties all along her life, she left her husband's home, considering herself as a mad lover of Lord Krishna. Her love and interest deepened as she grew. Her love for Krishna is seen in her lyrical compositions too.

The exceptionality of her lyrics lies in the effort that they attempt to produce those voices that cannot be voiced. No kind of stress and strain is felt in her renderings. They are pure melodies of everlasting love and affection. The listener could feel that the songs are not measured alignments of social teachings, but spontaneous versions from the fountain of a pure maiden's heart who fell in love with the Divine. Alike the melodies of a nightingale, these songs always delight the listeners with their natural sweetness. They conquer the world with pure love. Humanity in its finest forms, found expressions in her songs. After suffering many adversities from her husband's family like mockery, disgrace, abuse and domestic torture, and the defamation by a

conventional society and its 'created' rules, she begs to her lover asking Him to protect her from these hardships. Mira sings:

Do not go off and abandon me, My Lord,

Weak woman as I am

Giridhara is my strength

He is my Master.

I am quite without merit

While Giridhara possesses every virtue...

I place my ruined life

In the shadow of Your protection,

Where else could I go, O King of Braj?

Mira recognizes no other Master,

Now spare her from further ignominy. (Alston 54)

In the above song Mirabai is begging for the shelter from her lover (Krishna). Her love here is selfless and extreme. Krishna here is not only her lover of her dreams, but the saviour of her realities. She happily climbs the ladder of eternal love, by asking grace and protection from her lover. For a devotee, the eternal love never sprouts on a single day or a single moment, rather it happens by several stages of slow evolution. At this stage, Mirabai gets scoffed and scorned by the conventional society around her and she requires helping hands of her beloved. She might have sung this song in state of deep anguish and it might be composed after she left her husband's home. The significant point to be noted here, is that she never begs to any other man for protection but calls only her eternal lover. This signifies the depth of her love and the faith she has in Him. She declares, "Mira recognizes no other Master" (Alston 54). This whole dependency and submission to her lover indicates her *ananya bhakti* or exclusive devotion to Lord

Krishna, which underscores True Love. This pure form of love develops and blooms to an obedient and modest form, where all requests and difficulties of her are abandoned. Mira later sings, “My mind is fixed on Giridhara/ And cares not for the insults of the world (Alston 46).

Several disgraces imposed on Mira worked to strengthen her aloofness and dispassion towards the material world. In such a sense, the miseries, grief, disdain and such sorrows later became boons to the devotees. This led them to realise that true happiness and ecstasy of life cannot be found in the material world and in worldly relationships. The illusory nature of the indecisive and fleeting world naturally brings the mind of a devotee like Mira towards the Lord in quest of the real self, the basis of eternal delight. The marks of her external renunciation turn out to be obvious in the songs of Mirabai. In one of her lyrics she sings:

I have taken off all gems and pearls
And donned the yogi’s beads.
Neither food nor house please me,
The Beloved has driven me mad. (Alston 67)

The final line of the above stanza pictures the passion of her love for her lover, Krishna. When the raging fire of such yearnings overwhelms the heart of a devotee, nothing else can gratify the devotee. Attraction to all the material life stops for ever. It might be like a thirsty man who is being offered a crystal palace full of jewelleries, instead of a glass of water. The man rejects all these fineries and asks for water. With this similar note of urgency that stalks from deep love and affection towards the Lord, Mira declares that her beloved lover has driven her ‘mad’. Renunciation becomes a fruit on the tree of such passionate yearning. When the devotee possess ultimate faith and extreme love for lord, *abhayahasta*, or the hands of protection will always be there for the devotee. When we

trace the life history of Mira from the available data, myths and legends, this statement is found correct. She has miraculously survived several times from several hardships. She kept singing her lover's songs and nothing could stop her intense love towards Him.

God is not a super power who is seated on the golden throne of Heaven, but he lives in the heart of every human. When a devotee like Mira distinguishes this truth by herself, she could easily sing, "My Beloved rests ever in my heart" (Alston 42), obviously, making it clear that God dwells in every human irrespective of caste or creed, male or female. This universal recognition makes human to love, respect and serve God by loving, respecting and serving every people around him. If man is capable of seeing and realising the existence of God in him, then the devotee becomes the perfect servant of God. This is the supreme stage of devotion. Mirabai voices for this in her songs.

Unlike her contemporary poets, Mira never negates her personal feelings and emotions, instead she finds clear space in her verses to express her personal desires. She never denies the mortal world. She employed imageries and metaphors drawn from the earthly world. Various elements of Mother Nature, rivers, trees, birds, animals, earth, sky, clouds, flowers, castles, forests and so on found space in her songs. She portrayed the characteristic features of European romantic poets. She never turned blind against her mundane surroundings, rather, she draws inspiration for her songs from the rich nature. Her eternal love cravings towards her lover find expression in her lyrics by blending her emotions with natural imageries. Mira sings:

Over the trees

a crescent moon glides

The Dark one has gone to dwell in Mathura

Me, I struggle, caught in the love noose

and yes,

Mira's lord can lift mountains

but today his passion

seems distant and faint. (Schelling 170)

The entire song portrays the grief and pain she feels in the separation from her lover. These lyrics of separation resemble that of Andal, who also longed for her Beloved lover. Mira strongly declares that she is caught in the noose of love. But on the last line, it is evident that she feels she lost him. Her lord has gone to Mathura, his native place. All along the night she craves for him. Her intense longing is portrayed in the lyrics. Mira expresses her passionate feelings and desires to join with her lover as soon as possible. She hurts when he avoids her. The pain of a true lover is expressed here. The song opens with natural images of a moonlight night, trees and crescent moon.

Madhav Hada in his book *Meera v/s Meera: Devoted Saint Poet or Determined Queen?* mentions that many of India's mystic poets and saints had never expressed their bodily passions or carnal desires. Those poets always tried to promote the repression of such personal feelings in poetry. Gradually, it later became an unstated rule that the appetites of the human physical body and its physical senses are to be covered and only the abnegation of such feelings, comforts and pleasures would help to attain ultimate salvation (164). But, the songs of Mira contained deep love, passion and soulful devotion towards her beloved. Her verses prove that she wants to contemplate on Lord Krishna forever. Her entire life itself is a quest for Him. She is not detached from the physical pleasures that please material life. Hada points out, "A subdued shade of sensuous and physical impulses can be felt throughout her gamut of poetry". (Hada 165) Mira never tends to outdo her individual longings, but intensely accepts them. Her songs

prove that she had those inhibitions of a woman and freely developed passionate and vigorous feelings towards her Beloved lover. Mira sings:

Who would believe my story?
 That a lover
 bit my hand like a snake,
 and the venom bursts through
 and I'm dying. (Schelling 173)

The above lyrics portray the strength of love, she herself has submitted to her lover. His love bit her like the venom of a serpent. She is dying out of love. She wants her divine lover to take her with Him and dreams of the eternal unification. The lyrics, in a way rejoices in the expression of her passionate love. Her unbridled joys find expression in her verses. The bite of the snake and its venom justifies the depth of her relation with her lover and the love they mutually shares. The lyrics justifies that her passionate lover had marked his love on her. Therefore, Mira is happy to express her relationship before the world. She is not detached from the personal feelings of a woman. She used the same concept of venom in her another verse too. Mira sings:

lightning flashes
 in the dark
 scared
 I want him
 the wind is
 cool and musical
 the clouds
 are pouring rain
 where are you

Hari
your absence
is venom
in my veins. (Soni 16)

Mira uses venom as a strong metaphor to manifest her passionate love. In the above lines too Mira is in want of her lover. She intensely yearns for Him. In the first poem, venom is his love. In the second song, it is his absence. This suggests that the pain she feels at his absence is as equal as the joy she celebrates when he is with her.

Sister, the Dark One won't speak to me.
Why does this useless body keep breathing?
Another night gone
and no one's lifted my gown.
He won't speak to me.
Years pass, not a gesture.
They told me
he'd come when the rains came,
but lightning pierces the clouds,
the clock ticks until daybreak
and I feel the old dread.
Slave to the Dark One,
Mira's whole life is a long
night of craving. (Schelling 165)

In the above song, Mira is feeling the grief of separation. The Dark One here is Lord Krishna. She complains to her friend, that her lover is not speaking with her. Also, Mira feels completely lost and she even thinks there is no use of breath if he is not with her.

She has submitted herself to her lover. She cannot bear the pain of avoidance or separation from his part. Krishna is someone who is associated with rain. He was the saviour of his land when huge rain attacked them. He lifted up the mountain and saved entire Gokula. Now, such a saviour cannot come to relief Mira's pain. Like, the lightning that pierces the dark clouds pain pierces and breaks her heart. The pain of love is too hard to bear for a sensuous devotee like Mira. The night passes and now its dawn again. But the lover hasn't arrived. Mira declares herself as a submissive slave to her lord. She tells him that she is a slave to him, and hence he must embrace her. The whole life of Mira moves on like a dark long night of intense craving. Mira directly portrays her sexual feelings in her lyrics. She wants her lover to join with her. In her another song, she demands Krishna, "Dark One, take this girl for your servant/ Then cut the cords and/ set her free" (Schelling 167).

Mira strongly believes that when her lord accepts her as his obedient servant, then she is set free from all the chains of her material life. This suggests that the ultimate submission to the lord with supreme devotion and love could free human from their worldly sorrows, miseries or difficulties. This is the peak stage of devotion. The devotee reaches the stage of extreme bliss and ecstasy at this point. The quest of her inner soul ended when she attained ultimate liberation by her union with the flute player at 1578, in Dwaraka. Her desire was fulfilled when her lover cut the cords and set her free. (Ramana 105) Through pure love and devotion a devotee could attain salvation. The power of love is so hard that it can transform physical world to metaphysical stage. Mira sings:

You pressed Mira's seal of love
 then walked out
 Unable to see you

she's hopeless
 tossing in bed-gasping her life out.
 Dark One, it's your fault-
 I'll join the yoginis,
 I'll take a blade to my throat in Banaras
 Mira gave herself to you,
 You touched her intimate seal
 and then left. (Schelling 168)

The devotion towards God is not only an intense form of love towards Him, but also a fine form of expressing emotions of a pure mind. It is a feeling of heart, not intellect. The true love of God makes an ardent devotee lose themselves and fall for Him. Here, Mira's unwavering love and passion towards her lord gave her the strength to cross the barriers of her material life. Her dedication towards her lover is more vibrant as well as complete. In the last part of the lyric, she declares that she gave herself to her lord Giridhar. Now, she became his obedient servant. Therefore she never bothers about any disgraces or scorns against her. God to Mira, is an embodiment of infinity. In the above stanza she declares that God has marked his seal of love on her. This seal makes her his woman of love. Even though, she is in the edge of grief and separation she wishes for a ray of hope. In other words, she tells her lover that, if he doesn't arrive she will join with the mystic women or end her life at Banaras. She tells that she is truthful and conscious in her love towards Him. But still, for some reasons, he left her. The pain out of separation ties her intensely. Being a mad lover, she waits for Him. Mira's love towards Krishna is selfless. He is her lover, friend, protector, saviour and Supreme Being. She has reached into a stage of illusion. Her soul yearns for a physical and spiritual unification with her lord. Her reason of existence is Lord Krishna (Ramana 102-103).

No sense of insecurity is found in Mira's verses. Her object of true love is Lord Krishna. The confidence she has in her lover finds expression in her lyrics. She sings, "Mira's Lord is Hari, the Indestructible/ To Him would she sacrifice her life" (Alston 35).

All along her mystic life, Mira remained fearless against the slurs and slanders against her. She possessed the charm of her eternal lover who is imperishable. The strength of her songs lies in its one-pointedness, and absolute surrender towards her lover. She continuously declares that she has no other except her Krishna. Her lover is more than all her other familial relations. Mira states that there is no expected return for pure love. She had surrendered wholly to her lover. She sings about her lover, "If He sold me into slavery, /I would acquiesce" (Alston 41). This exposes the supremacy of pure devotion of an ardent devotee. If such an overwhelming love exists, then all defamations become a matter of insignificance.

Mira's use of simple language clearly defines her spiritual integrity and transparency. Love is expressed in its most simplest and direct forms. She was influenced by the distinctive culture of her land and the linguistic beauty it possess. Mira used several signs and metaphors relating to the feminine body and its adornments. Like Andal, Akka Mahadevi and Lal Ded, physical body was her significant tool of expressing her Self. She sings:

The Dark One's love-stain
 is on her.
 other ornaments
 Mira sees a mere glitter
 A mark on her forehead,
 a bracelet, some prayer beads,

beyond that she wears only
her conduct. (Schelling 171)

Her code of conduct is her expression of love. The stain of love is on her body. Her lover had marked it. She happily accepts this stain as the best ornament she could have. The stain might be on her forehead. Hence, she feels that the stain merely glitters. The bracelet and the prayer beads in her hand marks the adornment of Mira. It is not the outside fancies, but the truth and love inside human heart that is the best adornment for a body. Mira is rich with her love, dedication, truthfulness and obedience towards her lover, her Beloved. The stain of love on her body is her most favourite ornament. The imageries related to feminine body is employed in the above lines. The language employed is humble and straight. The intensity of her liberal love is expressed in its fullest forms. Mira continues:

She might not distinguish
Splendour from filth
But she'd tasted the nectar of passion.
Might not know any Veda,
But a chariot swept her away.

Now she frolics in heaven, passionately bound to her god. (Schelling 172)

Mira declares that she had tasted the sweetness and warmth of passion. She has not studied Vedas. Still her lord's chariot sweeps her away. Now she reached in ecstasy; at heaven. There, she is unified with her lord. Her soul was seeking the soul of her lover. No earthly pleasure could satisfy her passion of love. Her thirst for love ends with the unification with her lord. Lord Krishna personifies the soul of the universe. Her devotion is single-minded. She wished to transcend herself to the imperishable world of her lover. This world is devoid of worries, sorrows, miseries, death and filled with pure selfless

love. Her way of love takes the form of a bride who longs for her groom. The chariot mentioned in the above lines might be the chariot of her dreams where she joins hands with her lover and moves forward happily. This indicates her wedding ride with her groom.

Mira sometimes uses the theme of reproach in her songs. This is at the time when her lover breaks his promises and makes her sad. This reproach feeling develops as a part of intense love and longing for lover. Mira sings:

I gave
my body
my life
my every
precious thing
now show yourself
you promised me
in another life. (Soni 90)

Mira feels annoyed when her lover is not with her. She reminds Him of his promise. She already submitted herself to her lover. Now the time has arrived to take her with Him. It is at this time she feels betrayed as he is not appearing before her and breaks his promise. At times, she becomes lunatic with her love. She sings:

I dance
wearing
ankle-bells

people say

I'm mad

mother-in-law says

the ruin

of our clan

Rana

sent me poison

I drank it

and laughed

offered

body and soul

for one look

at you

Giridhar

my master

now let me come

to you. (Soni 96)

In the above lyrics, a dancing image of Mira is seen. She wears hers jingling anklets and dances in joy. The world says she is mad. Mira is a mad lover. She dances when she is in the state of ecstasy, overwhelmed by joy. She drunk the poison that Rana offered her

and laughed. No poison can harm her, she belongs to Giridhar. Her beloved lover is her eternal saviour. The protecting hands of her lover saves her. Mira had already offered her body and soul for her lover. She is ready to join her Self with her lover. She asks his permission to join with him. An image of a woman driven mad with love is depicted here. Mira herself states she is mad with love. Mother-in-law symbolizes the conventional society around her. Those people may laugh at her and disgrace her as the one who ruins their clan. But these disdain does not bother the lover in Mira. The lunatic girl in her is engulfed in ecstasy. Sometimes Mira herself represents Radha-the eternal lover of Krishna. Devotion is not something that coddle the feeble and the fickle who dance to the songs of erratic bodily desires. Lord bestows his grace to the genuine, committed and enthusiastic devotee.

The singing and dancing of an ardent devotee is a genuine manifestation of his or her internal bliss. At this stage, wholly immersed in the Divine by the passion of yearning in thought (might be the thought about the beautiful form of Divine), expression (singing about the glorifying deeds and plays of God) and action (dancing for the Divine), failing to recall all worldly interruptions that takes place naturally. From the day of birth every human is bound by consciousness about body, however to practice the stage of extreme ecstasy, this has to be transcended. *Sankirtans* or hymns where people sing the God's name with pure love and dance according to the beats of the sacred music with dedication, assist this transcendence of body consciousness, at least for the time being. The occasional chanting of the hymns with attention and recklessness can effect in giving heavenly delight to a normal soul. One can only imagine the intensity of ecstasy or bliss Mira must had experienced, who always whispered the name of her one can only imagine the bliss that a devotee like Mirabai experienced, she who literally breathed the name of her lover, Lord Krishna. The existence of such an ardent devotee

turn into a place of pilgrimage as the God's existence becomes exhibited by their passionate dedication. She continues:

only Giridhar

is mine

no one else

no one else

I've hunted

The world over. (Soni 113)

In these lines Mira makes it clearer that she longs for her Giridhar. He belongs to Mira. God is the lover here. Mira watered the tree of love with her tears of separation and kept the essence of true love in her safe. In one of her lyrics, Mira employs God as a businessman.

She sings:

our love

is ancient

I can't stay away

I'll sit

where he says

let him sell me

if he wants

he is my master

I'll let him do

Anything. (Soni 182)

In the above verse, Mira says that they fell in love during ancient days, so their love is deep rooted. Nothing can separate them. She cannot stay away from him long. Being a submissive partner, driven by mad love she agrees to whatever her lover asks. Mira says if he want to sell her, then let him sell. Her lover is her only master. She has no complaints in her lover's decisions. She leaves everything to Him.

The songs of Mira are a testament to the honest passion and gravity of her intense devotion. Even today, when these songs are sung or listened to, they fascinate the emotions of the listeners and uplift them to a diverse level. A deep listener is taken into the world of Mira and understands her dancing in divine wildness; no worries could attacks the mind of the one who listens to them with a genuine open heart. Her melodies are in themselves a declaration that God is Love and Love is eternal. In devotion, the common denominator is the love for God. When the love towards him is honest and aims at the Infinite, in a form or formless aspect, then there lies no place for any difference. When the body, mind and senses are drenched in pure love towards the Divine, they are destroyed, cleansed, and then the whole thing is perceived as the Divine; love dwells in the complete existence of the devotee.

Chapter 5

Body as Resistance: Re-Contextualising the Works of Female Bhakti

Poets

The idea of resistance has drawn critics and scholars from different fields including sociology, cultural studies, history, anthropology and political science. Later on, literature and fine arts also started to portray the voices of protest and resistance. It can be an action or even a strong statement against an authority or community. Mostly, protests are always pre-arranged, planned and organised and it is presented in a public space whereas resistance is not duly planned. It is covert and spontaneous. Haynes and Prakash in their Introduction to the book *Contesting Power: Resistance and Everyday Social Relations in South Asia* defines, “Resistance should be defined as those behaviours by subordinate groups that contest hegemonic social formations but threaten to unravel the strategies of domination. ‘Consciousness’ need not be essential to its constitution” (Haynes and Prakash 03). No mass demonstrations takes place in resistance. In fact, they are modest and peaceful campaigns to achieve a particular aim and involves persuasion. Resistance literature is therefore a piece of writing that calls to resist against power and domination and thereby aspire to change the prevailing condition of the society to make ready for an empowerment.

The resistance of women is different from that of vigorous agitations or revolutionary protests by men. Resistances are always conducted by the submissive groups or the subalterns. These groups consist of women bounded by patriarchal codes, laymen, workers, peasants and son on. They always confront the dominant groups regarding their rights. Domination and resistance are interconnected. Domination paves

way for the rise of resistance. Haynes and Prakash mentions that the opinion that resistance of:

Subordinated peoples need not be dramatic or informed by conscious ideologies of opposition to seriously affect relations of domination. To use resistance in its more traditional sense would mean not to consider the very processes by which power is often tested and eroded by the actions of the subordinate and by which it reconstitutes itself in response. (4)

Resistance literature written by women is describing their own life and inner thoughts as the stories of their own century-old harassments and suppression they suffered. Eric Wolf in his book *Europe and the People without History* mentions about the position of women in the male dominated society where their “life is cheap and where slavish multitudes grovel under a variety of despotisms” (6) can be considered as the base for resistance. In the words of Helen Cixous as appeared in her work *Laugh of the Medussa*:

Woman must write her self; must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away so violently as from their bodies for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal Woman must put herself into the text as into the world and into history - by her own movement. (75)

A woman entering into the field of writing is actually an act of resistance. They write about their emotions, feelings, sorrows, anguish, agonies, miseries and so on.

Sometimes, these writers also try to trace the background history of female writing and get inspired from their predecessors. This act itself is a strong blow of resistance against the canonical writing. They take effort to discover and bring back the literary talent of the women of earlier times. Susie Tharu and K. Lalita points out that women’s writings have frequently been involved in fighting with the politics of gender issues and “have

deflected and refigured the course of dominance” (116). They mention this in the Introduction to their book *Women Writing in India*.

Also, apart from that Susie Tharu and K. Lalita mentions in their Introduction about the story of Bangalore Nagaratnamma, who in 1910, reprinted the classic *Radhika Santwanam* (Appeasing Radhika), the work of an eighteenth century Telugu poetess Muddupalani, a courtesan of Tanjore palace. “Nagaratnamma was a patron of the arts, a learned woman, a musician and a distinguished courtesan, and she approached her editorial desk with confident professionalism and admirable feminist partisanship” (Tharu and Lalita 3). But she faced several atrocities from the publishers that none of them was ready to publish it considering the work as adulterous. Muddupalani used *sringara rasa* (erotic pleasure) to fill her verses with descriptions of sexuality. The work of Muddupalani and the attempt of Nagaratnamma to publish the same were both acts of strong resistance. A woman writing of her sexual feelings was a taboo. The love between Krishna and Radha was considered as platonic, not erotic. Muddupalani herself traces her literary heritage to her mother and grandmother, who were poets. Tharu and Lalita writes:

Traditionally in such literature, man is the lover, the woman is the loved one; Krishna woos and makes love to Radha. Though Radha is invariably portrayed as longing for him, the narrative has as its focus his pleasure. Not so in *Radhika Santwanam*, where the woman’s sensuality is central. She takes the initiative, and it is her satisfaction or pleasure that provides the poetic resolution. With a warmth unmatched in later poetry, Muddupalani celebrates a young girl’s coming of age and describes her first experience of sex. In another section, Radha, who is represented as a woman in her prime, instructs her niece, Iladevi,

in the art and joy of love. Radha encourages her to express her desire and to recognize and value her pleasure. (7)

The physical celebration of love between Krishna and Radha is described in Muddupalani's work. She herself is in love with Krishna and cannot bear the separation from him. The struggles of the republishing of the book happened during nineteenth century India, under British colonial rule. The moralities of Victorian rule were against the expression of women's physical desire. Therefore, the attempts of Nagaratnamma to publish the particular book during those days have to be considered as a strong blow of female resistance against the patriarchal society.

Far before that, the female mystic saints of medieval India had explored this idea of resistance using their physical body. Human physical body was a matter of resistance and a celebration of pleasure. They communicated their emotional desires, intense love, and sexual cravings through their sensuous verses. This sensuality of the verses itself was a form of resistance. It was a social taboo during the medieval days where women come to the forefront of the society and express their internal desires using their physical body as strong metaphor. Celebration of body was a tool of resistance. They chanted, sung and taught people by accepting physical body and travelling beyond body, into a metaphysical stage. Nivedita Menon in her book *Seeing like a Feminist* points out:

These mystics expressed a kind of desire for God that travels through the body and reconfigures it. Their desire was to attain the loss of maleness as sexualized powerlessness. A. K. Ramanujan suggests that 'the lines between male and female are continuously crossed and recrossed' in the lives of the Bhakti saints. They demystified the body and sexuality by dismantling the codes and conventions that 'sex' the body. Bhakti saints turned away from sex in the world

– not from fear or hatred sexuality, but because their sexual passion was invested entirely and in a disembodied manner, in the chosen deity as lover. (57)

When women saints like Akka Mahadevi of Karnataka and Lalleswari of Kashmir threw away their clothes, they were actually expressing the real ‘modesty’ of resisting as well as enhancing the sexual curiosity of humans, but never curbing it. When clothes are thrown away, it is this paradox that is portrayed. By exposing the differences between man and women and maintaining an indifference to that difference, they attain liberation. (Menon 58)

According to the legends of Tamil Nadu, Andal was born at Srivilliputtur, a small town in present Virudunagar district of Tamil Nadu during the mid-eighth century. The story tell that Vishnuchitta Alwar, a great Alwar poetic saint and the head priest of Srivilliputtur temple found the baby Andal in his basil garden, which reminds the birth of Sita in *Ramayana*. He brought up the girl with enormous fatherly affection, love, warmth and care, believing that the baby girl is his lord’s gift to him. It might be under the guidance of Vishnuchitta Alwar, Andal received her immense knowledge about Lord Vishnu, his ten incarnations and other related Vaishnava stories. Alka Tyagi in her book *Andal and Akka Mahadevi: Feminity to Divinity* points out that:

Myths about her say that her consciousness was so infused with the *samskaras* of *bhakti* and devotion from a very tender age, that when she precociously fell in love with Krsna *avatara* of Vishnu, she adored herself with the garland that her father kept for the temple deity. She must have felt that she had all the right to wear it. This act, which according to the sacred injunctions would be considered as an act of grievous sin, was given a legitimate sanction by the Lord himself who appeared in Vishnuchitta’s dream and commanded him that henceforth only the garlands worn by Goda (Andal) would be acceptable to Him. After this sign

of confirmation of reciprocation of her love from the Lord, Andal now was immersed in emotion of intense love for Him and craved for her union with her *ista*. (68-69)

This itself was an act of resistance from her real life. She felt that there is nothing wrong in wearing the garland her lord wear. She had submitted herself to her lord. She belongs to him. So there is nothing wrong in sharing the garland. Her emotional sentiments is attached to her lord.

G. Mohana Charyulu in his article, “Bridal Mysticism in Andal’s Poetry” mentions that, it will not be out of context to make brief note on the existing theories of the concept of God and how Andal herself identified with Lord Sri Ranganadha as her husband and wrote immensely powerful Bhakti poetry in Tamil by paving a clear path to Jeevatma and Paramatma (the Supreme God). “Mysticism is a religious practice in which people try to get knowledge of truth and become united with God through prayer and meditation” (94).

The prominent 15th century Vaishnava leader and philosopher, Pillai Lokacharya mentioned in his text *Sri Vachana Bhushanam* that there exists nine different methods namely *pita*, *rakshaka*, *sheshe*, *bharta*, *jnayo*, *swamy*, *adharaha*, *atma* and *bhokta* to express the connection between a devotee and the God. Their unification is acknowledged as a kind of mystical wedding of Jeevatma with Paramatma. Again, amongst these nine methods of associations, it is the relationship between a husband and a wife have motivated numerous spiritually oriented female poets of India to express their visions, interpretations and outlooks about the conception of God. Andal (8th century), Akka Mahadevi (12th century), Muktabai (13th century), Janabai (13th century), Lalleswari (14th century), Mirabai (16th century) Bahinabai (17th century) and

several other poetesses and writers. From their point of view, the bride becomes the soul of a devotee whereas God becomes the groom (Charyulu 94).

This system of recognising Bridal Mysticism/ *Madhurya Bhava* (God as the groom and devotee as the bride) through love lyrics and emotional sentiments form the basis of Andal's resistance against patriarchal conventions. As a part of *Madhurya Bhava*, a devotee is free to express her sensuous feelings, internal desires, emotional desires and so on. This has a connection to the early Akam poetry of Sangham period, where the modes of love verses are associated with specific aspect of a relationship. For Andal, this relationship is her love and wedding with the lord. She rejoices over the unification with her lover. *Marutham*, the second tinai concept is interconnected here where the longing for loved ones are portrayed. The God associated is Mayon/Vishnu who is worshipped as Perumal or Tirumal. They perform 'Yadava' lifestyle of shepherds, denoting Krishna as a Yadava man and Andal consider herself as a maiden girl of Gokula in her work *Tiruppavai*. Andal directly celebrates the pleasures of her physical body when she is in love and the grief she feels at the time of separation. This is associated with the fifth tinai *Neythal* – separation and union. Here, by portraying the cultural backgrounds of her own landscape Andal is expressing her intense desire to unite with her lover. Her way of resistance is living as an Alwar saint in the Vaishnava devotional culture and protesting against the same. When the exact sense of the word poetry experienced metamorphosis to mention a very different form of devotion (*Madhurya Bhava*) her poetry itself was revolutionized. Physical desire and longing for the beloved were no longer suppressed. Her heart of devotion was the desire to unite with her lord. She immersed herself into the realm of physical body and expressed her stormy emotions. Sucheta Sankar in her work *Daughter's of Kali* mentions:

There can be no doubt that Sangham literature was an arena for repressive notions of chastity and submissiveness for women. The women poets had to follow the rigid literary conventions of the patriarchal Sangham. Failure to comply to the norms usually meant that the works were censored or considered unworthy of perusal. In any case, poetry was serious courtly business; a woman who wrote poetry was breaking taboos and ‘intruding’ into political and public space. (9)

It was from this restricted lineage of Tamil literature Andal emerges by breaking the shackles of Sangham cult and its inspirations. At the same time, knowingly or unknowingly the tinai concepts of Sangham poetry reflects in her works too. Herself being a woman, she started to compose verses of her own emotions and desires. Also, being an Alwar saint and brought up in a Vaishnavite tradition, Andal found her lover in her lord. She passionately started loving him and described her bodily desires in her lyrics. In *Nacciyar Tirumozhi* Andal sings:

O Manmatha! My voluptuous breasts swell
for that lord alone
who holds alone the flaming discus and conch.
If there is even talk of offering my body
to mortal men, then I cannot live. (Venkatesan 148)

In the above lines, Andal expresses her bodily feelings. She is not ready to offer her body to a mortal man, as it belongs only to her lord. She waits for that lord, discus and conch in his hand, her beloved. The verse deploys erotic sensibility of Andal. The verses are minimal but involves maximum intensity from the poet’s heart. It is an act of body and soul.

Myths about Andal says that she was really vested by several mystical powers that legends gifted. Even though downgraded as a woman, her Self was not considered significant sufficiently to be positioned at the heart of faith. This is exactly the rebellion in the verses of the female devotees. Andal says in *Nacciyar Tirumozhi*:

O ancient Kamadeva,

I painted the walls with your names,

your banner bearing the shark,

horses, attendants waving their fly-whisks, your black bow. (Venkatesan 148)

Sucheta sankar in her work *Daughter's of Kali*, opines that Andal's action bring around the Self as the originator of ultimate faith. She does so by regaining her power to compose more verses. The inscribed words were once the honour of the Vedas and the Puranas. Here, it is Antal who analyses, deconstructs and redrafts the 'Word of Faith.' (Sankar 11)

Andrew Schelling in his book, *The Oxford Anthology of Bhakti Literature* quotes, "She approached the image of Vishnu, embraced its feet, climbed into the Serpent couch, and vanished" (9). According to Sucheta Sankar, this entire absorption of the physical body into the Divine was the major example in the chronicles of Bhakti. It signified a contradiction at the temperament of Bhakti, and definitely in Andal's beliefs. The devotees can locate themselves only when they lose in extreme devotion. (Sankar 11)

Nacciyar Tirumozhi defines the passionate individual sentiment that the devotee senses. The entire composition is elite in its style. It was composed after *Tiruppavai* and defines about Andal's extreme long yearning to meet with her beloved as she feels deep agony, grief and anguish owing to the departure of her Lord. The expressions of such emotional sentiments by a woman saint were against the conventional social set ups of

her period. The whole work of *Nacciyar Tirumozhi* discusses about the celebration of her body. The initial stage of this begins in her earlier composition *Tiruppavai*, where she mentions the significance of physical purification by practicing ‘pavai nombu’ (vow) of Margazhi month. The significance of physical body and how the body acts as a tool of resistance against the patriarchal powers are exemplified here. The second *pasuram* of *Tiruppavai*:

Kohl does not darken our eyes

And flowers do not adorn our hair.

We do nothing that is wrong

And speak nothing that is evil

Instead we give freely

And offer alms to those in need. (Venkatesan 52)

Andal’s enlightened soul would find happiness only with its unification with God. The entire poem opens with an invocation to a full moon day of Margazhi month featuring the lion-like young vigorous son of Nangopala offering grace to his devotees. The above lyrics portrays the inner purification of maiden girls including Andal who is ready to submit herself to her Beloved. In fact, by portraying a whole maiden community of Madurai, Andal is indirectly depicting the resistance of a whole female community against the male dominated society. The vow they undertake by early bath and chanting hymns of their lord, they are expressing their intense love towards him. Since the vow is connected with the body purification, by undertaking the vow, they are celebrating their body. The celebration of their physical body finds voice in her poetry.

The manifestation of the inner emotions and desires of Andal are strongly depicted in her poetry. Her dream is to unite with her lord. Garland is a metaphor depicting their unification and marriage. These intense longing and thoughts about her

lover are filled with extreme love and dedication and she is intensely waiting for the arrival of her groom. This is the finest expression of Andal's *Madhurya Bhava*. "The soul in practice and experience of Bridal Mysticism goes through the harrowing experience of separation from Him (Vislesham) and exhilarating experience of union (Samslesham) with Him" (Charyulu 97). In the *Varanamayiram* segment of *Nacchiyar Tirumozhi*, Andal imagines about the customs of her grand wedding ceremony with her lord. But, when she wakes up from her beautiful dream, she feels the grief of separation. Charyulu mentions that:

He asks the sacred conch (Panchajanya) and asks it to relate the blessed experience of the taste of the lord's nectar-like kiss. She implores the dark rain clouds, birds, flowers and bees to be her messengers to Lord and asks them to bring Him to her quickly. After these painful efforts, she decides to put up with her sorrow and places her trust in the Lord's infinite mercy. (97)

Even today in Tamil Nadu, the *Varanamayiram* series of *Nacchiyar Tirumozhi* is still well celebrated and recognised as auspicious. It still has its fame. They are sung by people in Tamil wedding ceremonies. The magnificence of these melodious compositions lies in the feature that a young woman, even today, on the brink of her marriage, considers herself as Andal. In Tamil Nadu, costumes, make-ups and hairstyle resembling the images of Andal are still in trend. This is how Andal exceeds the test of time. The tall gateway tower (192 ft) of Andal temple in Srivilliputtur town is believed to be the official symbol of Government of Tamil Nadu today. These lyrics are still welcomed with huge enthusiasm. It is very significant in the whole text that these lyrics detail every key segments of her wedding in all its glory and prosperity. Andal has a dream and she sees her favorite love as her groom.

Alka Tyagi in her book *Andal and Akka Mahadevi* points out that, “She is sharing her revelation with us through her song. Thus, the entire poem becomes a medium for expression of an experience of *bhakti* which is not acceptable to a *non-bhakta*” (71). In *Varanmayiram* segment Andal sings:

Surrounded by a thousand elephants, Nāraṇa
my great lord strode through the festive streets.
Every threshold was decked
with bright banners and auspicious golden pots.

Such a vision I dreamed, my friend. (Venkatesan 163)

In the above lyrics Andal is dreaming of her wedding. It is the vision of the lord in her dreams. Every rite, ritual and customs of the wedding ceremony is described in detail by Andal. She is marrying her lord. In other words, an immortal lord is going to wed a mortal human being. This is against all the conventional beliefs of a society. Apart from that Andal describes her love not in a platonic sense, but erotic. An entire section in *Nacciyar Tirumozhi* is dedicated to songs of desire. Andal ends the *Varanmayiram* segment by singing:

Kotai of the king of Villiputtur
city of Vaiṣṇava fame
wove this garland of pure Tamil
of her dream for the lord of cowherds.

Those who perfect these two times five verses
will find joy in their noble and fine children. (Venkatesan 164-165)

Archana Venkatesan states that the journey of a devotee from the stage of ignorance to merge with Lord Narayana requires *jnana bhakti*, which must undergo through the phases of great devotion defined by an inner image of a supreme god, where discerning

of knowledge occurs and if the devotee possess an intermittent and absolute vision of god then he reaches the state of supreme devotion, where the devotee accomplish absolute unification with the lord (Venkatesan 204).

Andal's *Tiruppavai* too showcases the experience of living in higher domains of consciousness. "The entire poem is a very complex work of art which enjoins in itself a highly symbolic design of a theological base" (Tyagi 71-72). The elusive characteristic of Alwar tradition and Vaishnava Bhakti is constructed in the whole verse in its full reach. Apparently, the lyrics are real pleasure and celebrations of the young maiden girls of Madurai in its complete level to take part in the yearly custom and accept the greetings, honor, blessings, richness and prosperity from the lord. A closer look of the poem represent the central content of the verse that is to melt the smaller sorts of desires into supreme level. The fundamental goal is the fusion with the Divine. For example, *pasuram* 26 of *Tiruppavai*, the maiden girls demands for 'parai drum':

O great one, the color of a dark gem
 If you ask us what we need
 for this ancient Markali vow, performed even by our ancestors
 Listen, these are it:
 conches
 like your *pancajanya*, white as milk
 that makes the world shudder with its deep sound
 a large magnificent *parai*-drum
 chanters singing the *pallantu*
 beautiful lamps, canopies, banners.
 Lord who floats upon a banyan leaf
 bless us with all this. (Venkatesan 76)

In the above lines, the transcendence and accessibility of Narayana is portrayed. He is as beautiful as a dark gem which even beguiles his enemies. He is radiant and multifarious. Here, Andal asks for his blessings. They are internally and externally purified with their daily practice of vow. She portrays her lord Krishna as the one ‘who floats upon a banyan leaf’. She depicts her needs vibrantly such as conches, *parai* drum, *pallantu*, canopies and so on. She never begs or simply requests for them, but demands them. The power of her voice is manifested here. Andal herself thinks that she has the right to possess her lord’s favorite accessories including his conch. Hence, she celebrates her authority of being his eternal lover who has her personal rights upon her beloved. Andal manifests the mood of an extreme devotee and an immense lover. This way of declaring love in public by a female lover was an example of breaking the conventional cords of medieval society that hosted male patriarchy.

The poetic melody of *Tiruppavai* lies in expressing the image of *parai* drum that is expressed with multivalency that underscores the unique beauty of Tamil. The geographical location where the poem is set, is the rich town of Putuvai which is created in resemblance with Lord Krishna’s Vrindavan (*Ayarpati*). The place is rich with ample rainfall and suitable to herd cows. Their udders are always full and milk, ghee, honey or sweets flows over. The term *parai* also has its Sangham connection since the ancient Tamil kings of Pandya kingdom stayed accustomed in using the *parai* drums to summon their people at the times of war or to give announcements to the general masses. Hence the *parai* became an essential twofold symbol of heroism and courage and also a mighty tool to the media to pass on proclamations and to inform news in periods of war. The literal use *parai* drum her lyrics is therefore a strong symbol of resistance as they denote valor and braveness to fight against enemies and declare strong statements to the masses. In *Tiruppavai*, *parai* drum is a strong metaphor to announce her state of mind in

full courage to the public. The feminine existence of Andal beyond any doubt establishes the ecstatic feminine yearnings and the unending pursuit for surrendering themselves at the feet of a deity.

The *écriture feminine* of Helen Cixous places the physical body as the center of any action or creation. The body is wholly celebrated in its fullest forms. This human body is never considered as a social taboo, forbidden or treated as unholy. It is fascinating to signify that Andal can be traced as a pioneer for *écriture feminine* centuries past as she used her feminine body as a medium for the accomplishment of supreme devotion with great magnitude that was unheard from the part of a woman saint in the journals of Indian devotional poetry till then. In stanza 7, Andal invokes Manmatha by singing:

O Manmatha!

I cooked fresh newly harvested grain.

I offered you sugarcane, sweet rice, and flattened paddy.

And learned men praise you with great words!

Coax Tiruvikrama

who long ago measured the worlds,

to caress this delicate waist and these broad breasts

and great will be your glory in this world. (Venkatesan 149)

The above lyrics of Andal are erotic in the sense that she used her feminine body as a strong medium to express her closeness with the lord. She has prepared fresh food, offered sweets and rice to her lord and waits for his arrival. She suggests that if he takes care of her his glory in the world will last test of time. To take care of her not only means to offer blessings but also to unite with her physically. The usage of the terms

‘waist’ and ‘breasts’ in the above verse indicates Andal’s way of resistance against medieval patriarchal norms by celebrating the eroticism of her feminine body.

As *parai* drum forms the major metaphor for *Tiruppavai*, it is the white conch that triggers *Nacciyar Tirumozhi*. Conch is a strong metaphor to express her love for lord. The *Panchajanya* or the *Valampiri* conch is a divine element of respect. It is always seen in the hands of Narayana. Andal remarks her lord with conch as, “My perfect lord/ who holds the spotless white conch in his left hand (Venkatesan 159). The seventh segment of the entire poem discusses the significance of conch. It is the symbol of success and has greater proximity to the lord. Andal sings:

O Panchajanya!

Your food is the nectar from the lips of the one who measured the worlds.

Your bed is the hand of the one dark as the ocean.

Women everywhere scold you soundly

What you do is unfair. (Venkatesan 169)

As mentioned above, the unique peculiarity of the conch lies in its proximity to the lord as it tastes his sweet lips signifying the inseparability between both. As the entire verses speak about the inseparability of the god and devotee, the white conch is a perfect metaphor to draw the close relation between the two. It symbolizes the eternal union. Dr. Sarada Thallam in her article “Antal’s Contribution to Bhakti Poetry in Tamil Literature” points out:

Some of the lines may appear shocking to traditional thought. But a perception of the metaphysical co-text in the works only add to the depth and width of the *bhakti bhava*. Its expression in a uniquely female sensibility places Antal as one of the pioneers of women’s writings of India. (12)

Andal also connects the conch with her conch bangles. Andal speaks, “The conch he holds in his hand is dear to him/ Aren’t my conch bangles as dear to me” (Venkatesan 177). Here, in the above lyrics, she questions her lord for taking her bangles. These bangles are a metonymic symbol of lord. Sarada Thallam remarks, “Since the heroine stands unable to achieve a total union with the Lord, the conch is transformed into a poetic metonymy that both represents the Lord and his union” (13). The separation of the bangles resembles the separation from God. Thallam continues:

It is not merely the loss of the material possession of the bangle that she bemoans but rather for the loss of her “very life”. Her life undoubtedly rests with the Lord and the Lord is symbolized through the conch bangles. Therefore a theft of the bangles even by the Lord himself leads to a separation from the Lord for which she laments. The poems are intensely traditional while also being simultaneously subversive, since Antal is unconsciously posing a distinctly gynocentric tradition against the phallogocentric thought of Indian bhakti poetry, that only suppresses women’s voice. Having being “othered” in the Indian bhakti system her uniquely female linguistic identity subverts the masculine symbolic language and creates novel linguistic epistemes since Antal’s bhakti begins with the body, but does not end there. (13-14)

Andal creates a nexus between physical body experiences and supreme devotion. The realization of the human soul is not removed from the body, rather the libidinal force portrayed in these lyrics convey a new energy that gets discharged from the physical body and also finally transcends it to a metaphysical state. (Thallam 14) The usages of sexual metaphors are in fact poetic metonymies for the portrayal of supreme level of erotic love that lies within the heart of the poet. In the book *Andal: The Autobiography of a Goddess* Sarukai and Sankar remarks:

Andal's insistent and unquenched longing belongs to a different dimension: a singular comprehension of her sensory needs as well as the acute physicality of the godhead. For instance, in Song Eight she calls him The Supreme One while simultaneously demanding that the saffron paste she adorns her breasts will be smeared in his embrace. (Sarukai and Sankar 40)

Andal has undoubtedly created a fine gendered space for herself in spectrum of Bhakti cult. From very ancient days women faced several barriers to portray their modes of erotic sensibilities towards a male deity since the female gender was only allowed to devote themselves to their mortal husbands. This was a crucial matter of feminine chastity. Actually the notion of Bridal Mysticism gets questioned when medieval women like Andal lacked the autonomy to celebrate social, political and cultural freedom and celebrate the *purushothama* like male poets. To express devotion in the form of erotic sensibility was definitely a problem of unchastity. But Andal challenged these pre-occupied notions of society expressing her Bridal Mysticism. Andal blended the codes of feminine episteme with that of *Madhurya Bhava/Bhakti*. She holds a special place in Tamil literature as she showcased an iconoclastic poet as well as traditional. "In transcending all binarisms, she smoothly merged into the supreme spirit thus succeeding in her metaphysical quest" (Thallam 14).

Man-God relation is the central locus of all religions in the world. An ardent devotee is always attached to God by his passionate emotional attachment and ultimate faith in God. As the Alwar/Nayanar tradition of Tamil culture, Karnataka witnessed the emergence of Veerasaivism (Saivite tradition). P. Shailaja in her article, "Women Poet-Saints of the Bhakti Movement" points out, "According to Sri Ramanuja, bhakti is a kind of love that is constant and fearless" (49). The women saints of the tradition

replaced their mortal husbands with their favourite male lord. Like Andal in Tamil Nadu, It was Akka Mahadevi/ Mahadeviyakka in Karnataka that attracted people to the cult of female mystic life.

As an astonishing figure of Bhakti tradition, she went through life changing experiences and attained salvation through her single minded devotion. Akka was a complete rebel of her period who came out of the shackles of male dominated society and fashioned her own route to achieve her divine goals. Her domain action with a threatening lifestyle along with her powerful *vachanas* created numerous political, social and cultural revolutions. She used her body as tool of celebration and resistance. She tried to experience a physical unification with the lord *Chennamallikarjuna*.

Her spiritual identity is observed using the social scenario of the period she lived. She was born and brought up as a Lingayat girl worshipping her ishtalinga. Her passionate love to *Chennamallikarjuna* is the result of her sheer conditioning. Akka sings:

Night and day

in your worship

I forget myself

O lord white as jasmine. (Ramanujan 130)

The above lines make it clear how intensely she loved her lord. It was not easy to live inside the shackles of a tradition and fight against the patriarchy of the same tradition. Akka, being a strong Lingayat woman raised her voice against the male domination of her own tradition questioning the entire sect through expressing her personal feelings

and emotions. The physical body and celebration of its carnal desires became the major theme for her lyrical compositions. Being born as a young beautiful damsel, Akka remained unconcerned to her physical beauty. Her parents, even though being ardent Lingayat followers were not ready to accept their daughter who was going to accept the tradition literally. Leela Mullatti in her work, *The Bhakti Movement and the Status of Women* points out that:

The vachanakars looked up marriage as a key institution that should help man to enjoy all physical pleasures and worldly desires in a regulated and rational manner. According to them, more repression or rejection of these desires can never help for spiritual development and realization. (68)

The women of Veerasaivite tradition regularly explored powerful sensual pictures in their poetic compositions. They employed these sexual images and metaphors to depict their intense relationship and unbounded desire to unify with their supreme God, Lord Shiva. Rather, if a man uses such sexual connotations in his verses, then he might chiefly take on feminine as a crucial subject and may apprehend the physical desires of a maiden heart. He then should construct God as a macho being. Similarly, in case of female poets, it is very easier that the pictures, similes and metaphors of their sexual unification evolve certainly in their heart and accordingly they can further merely represent their manifestations of passionate desires more impressively than their male counterparts. This could be a primary intention behind Akka's verbal descriptions of bodily desires all along her lyrical compositions bearing in mind her *Chennamallikarjjuna* (Lord Shiva) as her husband.

Akka Mahadevi, during her entire life treasured to complete her passion and warmth with her 'divine' mate and not with any mortal human being. Her loving

husband was none other than her Lord *Chennamallikarjjuna*. Her entire physical cravings were only intended towards him. Several times, her lyrical compositions depicts her physical submission to her Supreme lord. Even though several of her images find their expressions and space in describing a physical unification with God, they also indirectly mention about the sacred amalgamation with the God which she always yearned. The manifestations of her bodily cravings were a powerful blow against the conventional norms of macho medieval society. She wrote:

He bartered my heart,
looted my flesh,
claimed as tribute
my pleasure,
took over
all of me.

I'm the woman of love

For my lord, white as jasmine. (Ramanujan 125)

The sacred *vachanas* of Akka Mahadevi always attempted to portray the images of an adulterous love and passion to manifest the poet's intense longing, burning desires and all-encompassing unification with *Chennamallikarjjuna*, her beloved. It is at this stage where Akka for certain gets extremely intoxicated by her lunatic passions and hence easily submitting herself with no other advances inhibitions. She tried to use all the figures and forms of Mother Nature which, according to her, was permeated by her beloved. For example, she wrote:

You are the forest
you are all the great trees
in the forest

you are bird and beast

playing in and out

of all the trees

O lord white as jasmine. (Ramanujan 122)

Subsequently, the entire transmission of all her earthly love and yearnings, she naturally enters into the state of absolute transcendence. After entering into this fantastic peak of sexual transcendence, gender discrepancies becomes entirely worthless and the mystic poet, whether male or female, careless of their gender travels alone naked, expressing their nudity. To Akka, the whole material world was a large cage where the ordinary people become mere dwellers and so are simply classified into males and females. Henceforth she protests that people who only observe those dissimilarities seen in the outside gender however the self/spirit that survive inside of a human being is neither of a man nor of a woman. Accordingly, she powerfully questions the macho world about why they are staring at her sagging breasts and untied long thick hair. She questions why they stare at her physical body. This questioning was her powerful way of resistance against the patriarchic norms.

In spite of being in exceptional cases, the nakedness exposed by a man has never become a matter of great controversy as female nudity did. Myths and legends about Akka Mahadevi claim that she walked naked with her thick long black hair covering her entire body. When her nudity is questioned, she replies:

You can confiscate

money in hand;

can you confiscate

the body's glory?

Or peel away every strip

you wear,
 but can you peel
 the Nothing, the Nakedness
 that covers and veils?
 To the shameless girl
 wearing the White Jasmine Lord's
 light of morning,
 you fool,
 where's the need for cover and jewel? (Ramanujan 129)

The above lines are the most discussed and celebrated verses of Akka. They are directly against the social conventions reminding the society that there is nothing wrong in expressing the nudity of physical body. If a man is free to express it, a woman too can. Akka depicts the equality of gender and the multitudes of feminine body. She explains that human sexual body is not just an average physical entity, instead it is a powerful societal image, an ethnically celebrated exemplification which is distinctly designed by the social groups. According to the spiritual writings, a human physical body is something intrinsically corrupted, polluted, unhealthy, transitory, which is considered as the prison house of the spirit - the spirit that is fresh, clean and superior. These teachings further adds that body is also an embodiment of physical 'corruptions' and interruptions, an obstracter to one's transcendent development. Such opinions delivered by the spiritual treatises enlarged and societies easily start believing those impressions that the human body is something dirty and infected, hostile to the hygienic spirit and insignificant to the human mind. They considered it as an enemy which is to be disciplined, controlled and subjugated. Such incorrect percepts about human body have caused in losing its intelligence, strengths and natural instincts. Mystic poets like Akka

tried to defeat these notions and proclaimed that human body is not an impediment or of less significant to the human psyche. In opposition, it is a clean domicile of human intelligence, knowledge, emotions, creativity, enlightenment and so on. It is the human state of mind occupied with various emotions and ardent intelligence that delivers the opening for this possibility. Here comes the importance of poets like Akka Mahadevi. They found the intellect of questioning one's binary mind, submitting themselves by giving up all attempts, and therefore the qualities in the body gets quickened and bring forward the transcendence. Accordingly the strategy of controlling human body intended at building 'socially acceptable values' were powerfully opposed.

According to Akka, the physical body was not at all liability, but a sphere of happiness and celebration. It was the most direct tool to express her emotions and feelings, to resist the queries of patriarchy. Akka intellectually acknowledged the importance of human physical body and used it as a medium of expression. Hence, she never wanted to discharge from every hindrances of expressing her feminine body, but rather she walked out in nakedness, in defiance of all social norms, and ultimately moved beyond all binaries, comprising male-female, and devotee-God. Mukunda Rao in his book *Sky-Clad: The Extra Ordinary Life and Times of Akka Mahadevi* points out that:

It is in the state of separation which is felt intensely and acutely by bhaktas – hence agony, also the urge to transcend the separation – that bhaktas, especially women bhaktas, deploy imageries of love, forlornness and sex. These convey their deep urge to overcome the agony of separation and transcend the divisive consciousness. (95)

The experiences of Akka Mahadevi can also be immediately connected with Bridal Mysticism (*Madhurya Bhava*) segment of Andal. But here, the rightfulness of the experience turns irrelevant. The beloved may not be a husband rather, he could be an illicit lover who passionately loves her. The way how Akka handled her sexuality is much varied than how Andal characterized herself and longed for the union with her Lord. It is further correspondent to that of a *devadasi*, than that of an obedient consort. She writes:

For hunger, there is the town's rice
in the begging bowl.

For thirst, there are tanks, streams, wells.

For sleep, there are ruins of temples.

For soul's company

I have you, O Lord. (Rao 123)

Uma Chakravorty mentions that like Andal, Akka never denies the human body, instead, accepts it (Chakravorty 26). She asks the whole world to follow the same. Her direct way of expressing never makes her ashamed of removing her clothes and expressing her nudity. For Akka, moving naked and celebrating her body was a drastic method against strict social constrictions of her period. Rao describes, "Her decision to strip off all clothing is a refusal to be circumscribed by the notion of the vulnerability of the female body, a refusal to make compromises because of it" (95). In the above mentioned sense, it could be said that Akka defeats and suppresses the social menace it poses and could be the only female saint who had the braveness to do so. In short, she works inside the human body, not outside, as her other contemporaries.

In most of her early verses, Akka Mahadevi remarks all those symbolic representations from her domestic life, family associations, love, affection, physical

body, sex, etc., to specify or to communicate her feelings, distress and hurt that she feels at the time of detachment, her sacred struggles and mental dilemma along with her perpetual longing for her beloved to bond with him. The concealed implications of these pictures have a tendency to alter according to the flows ahead on Akka's religious track.

For Akka, her feminine body is neither a burden nor a curse which she has to control according to the societal norms: rather, it is the perfect seat that she could offer to her Lord *Chennamallikarjjuna*. The body is the place where her search, her divine spirituality begins and ends in complete fulfillment. She uses the method of love poetry to convey her eternal yearning filled with warm desires to unite with her beloved. He is her eternal and illicit lover, for whom she is ready to break all the societal norms of a marriage (which she later did).

She describes herself as 'a shameless girl'. She asks to the patriarchal society:

O brothers, why do you talk
to this woman,
hair loose,
face withered,
body shrunk?
O fathers, why do you bother
with this woman?
she has no strength of limb,
has lost the world,
lost power of will,
turned devotee,
she has laid down,
with the Lord, white as jasmine,

and has lost caste. (Ramanujan 135)

Akka, in a conversation with Allama Prabhu replied that one cannot confiscate other's glory of their physical body like money or other material wealth. Clothes can be stripped off, but nakedness cannot. In her lyrics, she wrote:

To the shameless girl
wearing white jasmine Lord's
light of morning,
you fool

where's the need for cover and jewel? (Ramanujan 139)

According to Mahdeviyakka, her physical body was not a limitation to her act of consummation with her beloved. To her, it was the 'gendered' physical body that stood as a chief societal hindrance, a social conditioning, or a superimposition, which is polluted. Hence it must be cleansed to travel into the outside world of opposites and along with that, all other dishonest appearances of the mind is healed from all contaminants, and therefore there is no more space for the pollution of human body.

Society interprets body as a venomous serpent that must be somehow controlled or defeated. The communal schemes and the prevailing procedures of the medieval ages considered physical body as something to be scared of. But Akka continuously tried to breakdown all such fallacies and identified it is a blessing to have bodies. Because, human body contains the exact superior component of illumination. They are the glowing spring of heavenly supremacy. But frequently man desires to hide their body or cover it gently. According to Akka, it is a great ignorance. Once the body-mind is cleaned of the vicious hungers, holiness initiates to express itself. Akka recognized the 'extreme beauty' of human nakedness. It is delightful, thrilling, enchanting and at the

same time, troubling. It may tremor or disturb others for the reason that it may highly intimidates and questions the traditional establishments and masculinity.

In eastern religions including Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism, human nakedness is frequently related with *vairagya*, which exactly means pureness or non-attachment. The male nudity was easily accepted by the medieval society. It was even worshiped and purified to a higher degree whereas on the other side feminine nakedness was brutally criticized. Because of that the medieval community never recognized a man with long hair or clean shaved or who led an abnormal life from that of other males. Those men were strictly expelled from the conventional society. In contrast, if a female, who moves unclothed was treated as a strange being, or a serious threat to the society and its established conventional values. On this social milieu, Akka Mahadevi, who broke all these prevailing communal norms and wandered in all her nudity was a new experience. In the symbolic world, both male and female sexual signs carried diverse spiritual insights.

Akka Mahadevi, moved along the sacred pathway, true and honest to herself, courageous and supreme in spirit. Though she always dominates in her lyrical sensibility and rationality of her vocabulary, she also brings some exceptional mixture of complex notions. Akka's lyrics are a perfect winding of devotion and knowledge, of intense yearning and profound divine vision. Through her beautiful stanzas, she has left behind an amusing legacy of literary and spiritual heritage. She was wholly lost in the furious vigor of her passionate love for her beloved *Chennamallikarjjuna*. The celebration of her spiritual splendor continues, motivates and inspires the other followers to arrive into that everlasting sacred margin.

The voice of a poet is the carrier of a poem. The verses may be composed by the poet orally and later put down into literal words. Apart from being melodious in its tone

it can be teachings to the society. Every poet represents the society he/she lived. Like Andal and Akka drew the socio-political images of early medieval South India, it was Lal Ded in North (Kashmir) who manifested the northern currents of devotional cult. As mentioned in the earlier chapter, Lalla was inspired by both Saivite notions of Hinduism and Sufi concepts of Islam. Her verses (*vakhs*) were teachings rather than melodious renderings of beautiful discourses of Bhakti. They were highly metaphysical in its heart. Lalla showcased the 'body beyond body'. In such ways, her *vakhs* displays a different genre in the cult of Indian devotional poetry. Those teachings were her manifestations of resistance against the traditional norms. Lalla found the meaning of Self in initially accepting the mortal body and then traveling to beyond body where the devotee achieves complete ecstasy. This is the state where human physical body becomes metaphysical. The consumerist attitude of man is questioned in Lalla's verses.

The verses of Lalla are characterized by various conflicting and polar images that seem indifferent. She intentionally used the methods of illogic, opposite, paradox and other non-casual concepts. These compositions do not follow a particular metrical style of other medieval poems, a story narrative style and are manifested using hard, burning, stark images and personal outcries. The narrative technique of Lalla was different from her contemporaries. The intellectual blending of Saivism and Sufism (both had equal influence on Kashmir valleys) marked her poetic excellence. Lalla developed a niche for herself to create a pathway that later inspired other Bhakti icons like Mirabai to take on a brave, fearless, courageous autonomy from the shackles of macho world.

Lal Ded used the vernacular Kashmiri dialect, the language of general folks to connect with the society. She rejected the usage of Sanskrit, the language of elite class.

Her use of regional language made her teachings easily comprehensible for the general public and created a universal appeal for her *vakhs*. Her verses are the voices of a woman. A woman can only choose images, metaphors and similes from her domestic life and surroundings. There are no elite Brahminical strategies. This choice of accepting language and concepts from the regional surroundings marked Lal Ded's mode of resistance against the patriarchy.

A woman voicing her Self was a very rare phenomenon in 14th century. Even so, it took place in the valleys of Kashmir when Lal Ded emerged as a mystical saint and her voices of resistance vibrated in social scenario. She was a poet, a teacher, a guide, a prophet and a woman with high intellect and wisdom that could transform the conventional society. Without negating the significance of physical body and its personal desires Lal Ded opened a world of accepting the metaphysical body in transcendence: the most ecstatic form of human Self.

The verses of Lal Ded portrays a disgust for the material world. She strongly believed that to attain complete salvation, one should withdraw from the world and the material temptations should have certain limitations. This underscores her strong resistance against the consumerist attitude of world. Her life itself was the best example to this notion of limiting the desires on crazy material delights. She asks to transcend body and soul. She says:

A king's flywhisk, baldachin, chariot, throne
pageants, evenings at the theatre, a downy bed.

Which of these will endure

or blot out the fear of death? (Hoskote 145)

The above lines makes the point more clear. No material pleasures of the world can discharge man from the shackles of death. Hence, there is no sense in following them. Instead, accept the celebration of body. Sing and dance in ecstasy. Be a mad lover of your favorite deity. The power of supreme devotion can takes you to the world of complete bliss. Here, she intellectually employs the economic elements of material life that provide worldly pleasure. But this worldly pleasure is not the one that helps to attain salvation. Resistance against the economic life is justified in the lyrics.

In another verse, Lalla portrays the celebration of true love which could help humans to attain salvation or transcendence. She says:

I, Lalla, came through the gate of my soul's jasmine garden
 And found Shiva and Shakti there, locked in love!
 Drunk with joy, I threw myself into the lake of nectar.

Who cares if I'm dead woman walking! (Hoskote 70)

Lalla was treated as an outcaste from the mainstream society as Akka Mahadevi was marginalised. Her defiance against patriarchy and its regulations always made her sidelined. Hence, she knowingly took distance from the mainstream and embodied herself with the mystical sphere. For a medieval woman like Lal Ded, it was too difficult to voice against the Brahminical hierarchy and the elite modes of social status. Still, she established a platform for herself. By seeking shelter in the mystical spectrum, she challenged the masculine world. she created a transcendental space of her own for the existence of her Self.

Lal Ded knowingly used dance as a crucial element in her *vakhs*. Dance represents the extreme state of ecstasy. A woman like Lal Ded dances when she is in extreme love with her lord. At those times, she becomes a blind lover of her lord who transcends herself into complete bliss. This was against patriarchal norms to accept lord in physical as well as metaphysical state. She says:

My master gave me just one rule:

Forget the Outside, get to the inside of things.

I, Lalla, took the teaching to heart.

From that day, I've danced naked. (Hoskote 97)

The so called Animal-body-rootedness is characterized in the verses of Lal Ded. Her verses discuss about the intense involvement and inseparability of physical body and inner soul. Here, 'dance' is a significant technique to denote the stage of ecstasy along with elements of human vocal growls, sighs, moans and even weepings.

After leaving her husband's home, the drastic step adopted by Lal Ded was to disrobe herself. She, like Akka, manifested the significance of physical body by expressing her nudity. There is nothing to conceal in expressing oneself. By residing upon the interior self, Lalla had experienced the genuine nature of things. At the very moment she realized this, she left the unnecessary baggage of traditions and conventions, the so called cultural signifier and clothes. The dawn of consciousness awakened. This awakening was against the patriarchal belief of the society she lived, which later outcasted her. The wandering nature and the nudity she possessed were the strong codes of disapproval and rejection against the patriarchal social conducts and

worldly associations including her domestic life within family and home. Neeraja Mattoo, in her work “Lal Ded: The Poet who Gave a Voice to Women” points out that:

She seems to have become completely unself-conscious; almost unaware of her body... she refused to be bothered by what the world would say when she went about naked. When she was asked whether she felt no shame at showing her body to all men around her, she asked whether there was a man around! To her ordinary mass of people was no better than sheep or other dumb animals ...who apart from the lord was a real man? (76)

Neerja Mattoo declares that nakedness of Lal Ded later became symbol and a strong sign of control that indicated the transcendence of her feminine body. She was only conscious about the ecstasy of her inner Self, not the pleasures of the material world.

The spiritual wanderings of Lal Ded in the above manner is a symbolic representation of the transgression of worldly customs and notions of gender that filled the internal psyche of general public from the ancient days and continuing even today. She knowingly rejected the material world and the consumerist masses that survive there. When questioned about her identity of being naked, she daringly replies that she feels no shame in expressing her nakedness that she cannot find a perfect mortal man in this world but could only witness dumb animals or sheep that gaze around. Lal Ded possessed high confidence in herself and the ultimate faith in her soul helped her to attain complete salvation and reach the metaphysical state of ecstasy. Her transgressing spirit as a woman increased with high potential. An eye could be always possessed to watch the realities around.

The verses of Lal Ded showcases that she was a strong woman who was extremely conscious about her bodily desires, emotions and thoughts. She suffered curses and disgraces from the surroundings for transgressing her inner spirit to reach the metaphysical state of ecstasy. But Lal Ded stood firm with her ideologies and nothing shackled her from her beliefs. She was well aware of the patriarchal world around her and knew how to resist the unwanted dominations and authorities that control human life. She sings:

I, Lalla, set out to bloom like a cotton flower
 The cleaner tore me, the carder shredded me on his bow.
 The gossamer: that was I
 the spinning woman lifted from her wheel.

At the weaver's, they hung me out on the loom. (Hoskote 40)

In the above lyrics, Lal Ded expresses coming to the world as beautiful and delicate cotton flower. But, still she received hard obstacles from the society. She herself felt internal needs to transmit the community assigned gender roles. She compares herself with a washing soap to set an example. She relates purification of her body and soul by cleaning the clothes with soap piece and then dashing it on the stone. Hence, she shreds her material life identity in comparison with that of a washerman's soap. The clean cloth is then cut into bits by the tailor. Here, Lal Ded took examples from the domestic life of common folks. Tailor, weaver or a washerman represents common masses, who are unaware of Vedas or Upanishads. They speak in regional Kashmiri dialect. Such examples or connotations were unseen during the ornamented poetry of medieval days. The simplicity in her language and the idea she conveys underscores her poetic intelligence. The 'washerman' in following *vakh* connects to the inner self that resides

within her body and aspires to achieve supreme bliss. They take part in actions that empowers Lal Ded to transcend her feminine spirit. Every cloth bit that shreds resembles that part of her individual personality which shreds down and her exact identity gets revealed to the world. Lal Ded as a loving daughter, as a submissive daughter-in-law and a dutiful wife gets shred from her life and she emerges as a free spirit to embrace world with love and bliss. Her body gets transcended into metaphysical state. This defines the resistance against the traditional norms of patriarchy. Lalla says:

First the washerman pounded me on his washing stone

scrubbed me with clay and soap

Then the tailor measured me, piece by piece,

with his scissors. Only then, could I Lalla,

find the road to heaven. (Hoskote 41)

Lalla always felt to elevate the women of her times from their simple domestic life to a sphere where they can express themselves. The medieval patriarchal norms deprived their autonomy and freedom and restricted them to mere domestic chores. The notions of self esteem or self empowerment should be taught to them. As part of it Lal Ded tried to create space for women in the socio-political levels, religious levels and even linguistic levels. These helped many other mystic saints of India to adopt their own pathway of freedom and express their Self. Lal Ded was a predecessor to Mirabai who followed her path of supreme devotion. Revelation enters Lal Ded's heart like the image of a beautiful moon flowering in dark water. She used symbols, metaphors, allegories

that are occult or esoteric. But the splendour of her verses attracts her followers with its intense wisdom and knowledge. Hoskote points out in his Introduction:

She celebrates perseverance in the quest, contrasting physical agony with spiritual flight and dwelling on the obdurate landscapes that questor must negotiate. Lalla's poetry is fortified by a palpable, first-hand experience of illumination; it conveys a freedom from the mortal freight of fear and vacillation. She cherishes these while attacking the parasitic forms of organised religion that have attached themselves to the spiritual quest and choked it: arid scholarship, soulless ritualism, fetishised austerity and animal sacrifice. (Hoskote xix-xx)

In one of her *vakh*, she says:

It covers your shame, keeps you from shivering.

Grass and water are all the food it asks.

Who taught you, priest-man,

to feed this breathing thing to your thing of stone? (Hoskote 61)

She continues,

Kusha grass, flowers, sesame, lamp, water:

it's just nother list for someone who's listened

really listened, to his teacher. Everyday he sinks deeper

into Shambu, frees himself from the trap

of action and reaction. He will not suffer birth again. (Hoskote 63)

In the above lines, Kashmir Saivism advises the transformation of every exterior observances into visual images and experiments in consciousness. Hence, “the idol is replaced by the mental image and the sacrifice of an animal by the deliberate extinction of lower appetites”. (Hoskote xx) She was a critic of ritualistic religious practices. Offerings, chanting hymns or prayers do not fulfil spiritual ecstasy. She continues her questioning of religious customs and idol worship in her other verses too. Lal Ded says:

God is stone, the temple is stone,

head to foot, all stone,

Hey preist-man, what’s the object of your worship?

Get your act together, join mind with life-breath. (Hoskote 60)

This is one among the most discussed *vakhs* of Lal Ded. She again questions the idol worship and priesthood. Idol is something made up of mere stone from the head to foot. She asks the relevance of worshipping such a concept. Also, if man can access God within his/her innerself by supreme love and devotion, then there is meaning in priesthood. Priests are the mediators between man and God. If an ardent devotee can access God within his/her heart then there is no point in priesthood. This is a strong defiance against patriarchal norms religious practices. Lalla explores the inner Self of human being rather than moving towards outer religious customs. The intense dedication and love the devotee possesses can attain him the grace of God and enjoy the ultimate bliss. Lal Ded says:

Whatever my hands did was worship,

whatever my tongue shaped was prayer.

That was Siva's secret teaching:

I wore it and it became my skin. (Hoskote 66)

Lal Ded declares that her body is covered with the teachings and prayers of her Lord. This signifies that her nudity is covered by her lord. The intense love and dedication that she expressed to her Lord becomes her clothes. It is her Lord's love and grace that covers her. She showcased her strong way of resistance by expressing her inner desires without negating the existence of physical body and travelling beyond the body to a metaphysical state and attaining supreme ecstasy and bliss. She considers her physical body as the centre of all her experiences of self refinement. It is through the acceptance of physical body one could travel into the metaphysical state. Hoskote points out:

... she asserts the unity of the corporeal and the cosmic, as achieved through immersive meditation and the Yogic cultivation of the breath. The subtle channels and nodal points of the Yogic body for a basic reality for her, its terrain as real as the topography of lake, river and mountains that recurs in her compositions. (xxii)

It was the sacred seeds of Lal Ded that paved way for the emergence of other mystic saints in North India. The most noteworthy among them is Mirabai of Rajasthan. Her divine attachment later became an indispensable part of her personal identity and her affection towards her Lord Krishna made her a mad lover. He was her sole refuge. She had ultimate faith in Him. The love towards him extended to an intense state where she recognised Him as her husband. She sings, "Meera's Lord is the courtly Girdhar" (Alston 47).

Mirabai's nature and devotional intensity was slightly different from that of Lal Ded but the mental strength she possessed was more rebellious in the spectrum of female mystics. She evoked an open challenge towards the conventional patriarchal norms of medieval society its, rituals, customs and traditions. She had no fear in declaring, "Mira has dedicated herself to Girdhar/ And roams about in ecstatic mood arising out of deep love" (Behari 43).

Mirabai manifested her love towards lord in the form of *dasya bhava*, especially in the verses of entreaty. She has expressed *dasya bhava* in many of her poems especially in the verses of entreaty. She is immersed in the divine love of her lord and dreams of her unification with him. The theme of conjugal love encircles her verses where she never forgets the divine identity of Lord Krishna.

The spirit of her defiance attained its highest peak when her passionate love was questioned by the society including her royal family. She belonged to the lineage of conservative Rajputs who were basically Kali devotees. She was living in a patriarchal society where the chastity of a woman was responsible for the honour and dignity of her family. Society has clearly marked limits that shouldn't be crossed. But Mira questioned these strategies and walked out of these shackles in quest of her lover. She never showed interest in adhering to these codes of patriarchy. She stepped out from the usual expectations of a woman and wandered all along her life wishing to unite with her lover. Her lyrics were the expression of her inner self to manifest her passionate love towards Lord Krishna as well as questioning the barriers of societal codes. Today, Mira gained a global status as a powerful woman who went in search of her love and autonomy (Wasia 331).

In Krishna Subramaniam's translation, she sings:

I have no father, no mother, no relatives or brothers

I have broken family ties; who can do anything?

I have spoken of my love through my tears

Servant Meera has fallen

in love with the lord. (Subramaniam 34-35)

Mira is regarded as an embodiment of wild spirit of passionate love and a strong agent of this devotional rebellion. She never feared to raise her voice against the social anarchies at multiple levels. Her poetry had the backgrounds of an aristocratic family and an elite genealogy. Still, Mira stood for the women in general, for the women of love. In the above lines she remarks that she had broken all her domestic relations and portrayed her intense love through her tears. Mira has submitted herself to her beloved that none can separate her from Him. Through expressing her passionate love, Mira discards the bounds of patriarchy by confirming to her statement that supreme devotion to the lord is the base for all. It is the devotional spirit that granted her that courage to fight against the traditional norms of medieval society. Wasia Mushtaq in his article, "Religion and Literature: A Poetic Interface" points out about the rebellious Mira:

Meera was not a reformer, nor was she a preacher and neither did she establish any sect of believers. She was like many other humans who are caught in the web of this material world and who desire liberation from the social clutches. To her, religion became the means of achieving this liberation. She united herself with Krishna and attained salvation but the path that she took wasn't easy. There

were many stages that needed to be crossed in order to arrive at the ultimate state of Mystic union. (332)

Mushtaq closes the article by directly appreciating the resistance struggle of Mira towards the medieval society. Mushtaq states:

Fundamental to her poetry is her revolt against the hegemony, her suffering and surviving in adversity. In her tale, lies a veiled fervour of resistance and challenge to the status quo. There lies a potential that can readily be developed by any alternate community as people identify with her character and plight in different ways. Her values, hopes and aspirations speak to and for the people in wide ranging cultural, religious and social situations. (334)

Mira as an ardent devotee and Mira as a poetic intellect are brilliantly merged so that it is essential to study her poetry to discuss about her religious statements. The poetry of Mirabai is filled with *Madhurya Bhava*/Bridal Mysticism like that of Andal and Akka Mahadevi which grants her the permission to express her internal desires, physical cravings and bodily pleasures. This ardent love towards God permitted her the voice of being a mystic rebel the patriarchal norms of society. Devotional poetry was her tool of resistance. Mira never preached any special principles or doctrines or developed a special devotional cult. Instead, she accepted all the lovely facets of ardent devotion and practised them in her real life. She believed that she will be raised from the pangs of death and rebirth when she unites with Lord Krishna who is her sole lover and savior. Mira consciously uses phrases such as 'I will', 'I will not', 'I do', 'I am' and 'I have' in her verses. The employment of such phrases marks the internal strength of Mira. These phrases finds expression in her verses to establish her feminine strength and autonomy.

It was not easy to develop relations outside the family and such associations are always forbidden for a medieval woman.

Mira was strongly criticized for her social behaviours. But nothing could shackle her ideologies that she refused every disgraces and dishonours of the conventional norms by addressing that she belongs to her lord. Krishna Subramaniam translates:

The big palace is bolted I have turned away from it

I have nothing to do with the worldly matters

I have nothing to do with the officials

To gain the Lords grace, one can give up

The entire treasury. (Subramaniam 136-137)

In the above lyrics she displays her broken associations with the material world. She declares that the worldly matters never bothered her and she can do nothing with it. But, by supreme devotion and complete submission one can attain the grace of God. She is a wandering mystic who wishes ultimate unification with her lord.

After fighting with the domestic structures of her patriarchal family, she then had to face the oppositions from the society outside. She mentions about 'people of the world' in her lyrics, and draws the associations they had with her and discusses about the conventional fashions of the society. She never received positive reviews from the patriarchal society. They questioned her for her erotic sensible verses. But for Mira, the expression of this eroticism was the expression of her Self, the way of her resistance against the macho world outside. She intellectually noticed the priorities of the society and spoke against them. Hence, she herself kept a distance from the mighty world and

took abode in supreme devotion. She joined the group of mystic saints and found happiness in living with them, singing her songs vibrantly, with its beauty and splendor.

Krishna Subramaniam translates:

Unreal are the rubies and pearls

Unreal are the glitter and glamour

Unreal are all ornaments

Only the love of the beloved Lord is real. (Subramaniam 169)

In the above verses Mira portrays the unreal world around her. Actually her defiance is against this unreality. For an ardent lover and devotee like Mira, the entire world appeared as a false notion excluding the supreme power of devotion. The love of God is only real. In fact, Mira is speaking against the atrocities of the society where real love and affection perished and all the exterior settings are notions of falsehood or unreality. God and his love is only true and real. In another verse, Krishna Subramaniam translates, “The ignominy cast on me is sweet to me/ Let everyone speak ill of me or scandalize me/ I shall walk my wonderful path” (Subramaniam 88-89). The above lines explains that she stood unaffected to the society’s abuses and curses. She even enjoyed the ignominy that was casted on her. She says it tasted sweet to her. This sweetness is because of her passionate love towards her God. The ardent devotion of Mira burned within her inner Self as the fearless spirit of rebellion. This devotional power granted her the power to question the social systems. But, never in her mystic life did she used brutal words to confront her opposites. Her inner soul was still unaffected of their curses, disgraces, abuses and rebuking from them. The devotion in Lord Krishna granted her the religious right to select her individual pathway of freedom. She declared Krishna

as her exclusive lord, which was revolutionary in itself, against the social constraints of medieval period. Mira stood firm in her spiritual ideologies and created popular ways of resistance and rebellion against the macho domains of patriarchy. She left aside all her domestic bondings and sang. Krishna Subramaniam translates, “When I am not interested in big lakes/ Why should I care for small pools/ Even ganga and jamuna are of no use to me” (Subramanian 136-137).

Her verses portrayed a collective form of resistance and this was associated to not only the medieval women, but also the outcasted and subaltern people of the time. Mira never showed interest to be a part of any particular devotional sect and incorporated together people from every corners of the society irrespective of their caste or creed. These followers comprised up of people from elite classes and the laymen of the society. The attitude of Mira was to not be a part of any particular clan “she wants to belong to the world and to leave her work to the world rather than to her Rajput lineage- opens up the possibility of co-authorship by diverse sections of subaltern classes” (Bhatnagar and Dube 10). All the critical studies conducted on Mirabai showcases her as a mystic rebel, who is madly in love with her Beloved and remained a live tradition of rebellion, protest and resistance against patriarchal codes. Mira consciously refused to stick onto any such conventional or ritualistic practice of medieval society and emerged as a strong violator of the conventional system. Krishna Subramaniam translates, “Yes! I will give up my life for Him/ Because of you, I have given up/ Worldly modesty and family restrictions” (Subramanian 126-127). The above lyrics shows that she had submitted herself to her lord. It is the intense love and passionate desire on Him that made her to discharge all her domestic affairs and accept a life of a mystic love saint. She is ready to give up her body and soul to Him. Such an ardent lover cannot adhere to the social norms of family associations.

The eroticism in her lyrics sometimes makes her extremely rebellious in describing personal desires and physical cravings. But these bodily desires forms the crux of her resistance. To openly speak about her feminine body and its pleasures categorized Mira as a feminist poet of medieval India. The intense longing for her lover, the passionate love towards him, the grief of separation that she bears in her heart and such themes make Mira's love poetry more rebellious. These verses make Mira a mad lover. For example, she sings:

How bitter is the carnival day

with my lover off travelling.

O desolate town,

my small bed in the attic lies empty.

Rejected and lost

in his absence, stumbling under

the pain. (Schelling 169)

In the above lines Mira depicts her grief of separation that she feels when Krishna is not with her. At the same time, the verses produce images of erotic sensibility of a woman. She mentions about her empty bed indicating that she is in want of Him. She cries with mental pain in the absence of her lover feeling complete rejection and getting lost at his thoughts. Her mental anguish is pictured in the verses. Such lyrics of erotic sensibility were taboos in her period especially from the side of a woman. Here, Mira portrayed her rebellious mystical character publicly expressing her personal desires about her lover, who is the Divine God. Even though texts like *Bhagavata Purana* mentions about the

love relations of Krishna, his love is recognised as platonic. But for Mira, this love is intense, passionate and erotic. In Mira's verses Krishna is not a platonic lover. The same is explained in her another verse:

Dark One

how can I sleep?

Since you left my bed

the seconds drag past like epochs,

each moment

a new torrent of pain.

I am no wife. (Schelling 173)

Here in the above lines, Mira feels the intense grief when Krishna is not with her. She is sleepless as her lover left her bed leaving her alone. The seconds seems like hours, days or months. She says each moment the torrent of pain increases. The verses depicts the bodily separation she felt when he left her alone. Such personal cravings are common in Mira's lyrics. The desire to unite with the lord is her central aim. Her lyrics points out to this divine unification she waits for. A large number of Mira's verses are filled with combined taste of bitter-sweet joy of remembrance. She curiously speaks about the experiences she had with her love and the genuine nature of their love. At the same time, she laments with grief at his departure. Mira mentions in her other song:

Yogin, don't go -

at your feet a slave girl has fallen.

She lost herself

on the devious path of romance and worship,

no one to guide her.

Now she's built

an incense and sandalwood pyre

and begs you to light it.

Dark One, don't go -

when only cinder remains

rub my ash over your body

Mira asks, Dark one,

can flame twist upon flame? (Schelling 174)

The above poem indicates that Mira already submitted herself to her lover. She declares herself as a slave to him. She wandered along the paths of deep passionate love and ardent worship that helps her to achieve ultimate salvation. She demands her Lord to light her pyre with sandalwood and rub the ashes on his body. This act indirectly reveals the unification of body in physical life and the life after death. She wish even her ashes gets merged with her lover's body so that her soul can reside in him always. It's a flame upon another flame. The verses portrays her resistance to the patriarchal norms wishes to unite with her lover after her death. It defines that there is no meaning in practising rituals like Sati (which she denied in her real life) and if the love is eternal the lovers can

join even after death. Here the ashes get merged with the divine body of Krishna. Their relation is so deep that death never makes them parted. It is not exhibiting the chastity of your physical body by a religious custom that makes you purified, but it is the in-depth devotion, the ultimate faith in the lord and eternal love towards the lover that sanctifies human and takes to the state of complete ecstasy. In another lyric Mira sings, “Listen, my friend, this road is the heart opening,/ Kissing his feet, resistance broken, tears all night” (Bly 182). In the above lines, Mira confirms that she broke the norms of society. She declares that she kissed her lover’s feet. Her heart opens to embrace her lover. There is no meaning in resisting her physical desires. Her love for her Beloved is eternal. To express her love, she broke the chains of society. Her mode of social resistance finds expression in breaking the resistance of her bodily pleasures, manifesting her passionate love and longing for the unification with her Divine lover. Here, resistance towards society sprouts out of breaking her resistance of emotions and desires. B. V. Ramana in his article “Mirabai: Devotee of a Noble Order” points out:

Mira was among the earliest Indian women to violate the laws governing her class and royalty in refusing to follow the convention of Sati, on the death of her worldly husband. She deeply felt that she had been a companion of Lord Krishna through ages. She believed that in her previous life, she was one of the several Gopikas or milkmaids in Vrindavan, in love with Krishna. (102)

The above quote adheres to Mira’s refusal of patriarchal notions of accepting Sati after the death of her husband. But Mira, who already placed Lord Krishna as her eternal lover and immortal husband could never attempt Sati, moreover it was a cruel form of medieval anarchy and social dogmas. She herself believed that in her previous birth she was a milkmaid maiden of Vrindavan who eagerly listened to the melodious flute player

and danced with his musical notes in ecstasy. Such an eternal lover cannot adhere to Sati. Madhava Hada in his book *Meera v/s Meera*, mentions this notion:

Meera's devotion had a great mass appeal because she rejected the power play and ambitions despite hailing from an aristocratic family, and she did not conform to patriarchal dictates, in spite of being a woman in medieval India. So, her circumstances were unique, much like her devotion. She was not keen on accepting established institutions or values, she was unmediated by conventional forms of devotion or intermediaries. Her love for God was impassioned and liberal; ethereal yet grounded. Her feudal lineage enhanced her popularity; something which was hard to contest by her contemporaries. (147)

There is no doubt that her aristocratic royal lineage enhanced her immediate popularity among the devotees and general public. Such a royal aristocratic woman from a patriarchal family emerging as a mystic rebel itself was an act of resistance from her real life segment. She always accepted unique style in her life, devotion as well as in her poetic intellect. This made her to easily discharge the medieval institutional norms and accept a spiritual life of freedom and autonomy. This life of boundless autonomy, fearless attitude and discharged social norms served as the base of her spiritual resistance.

Apart from her lyrical sensuality, she used, Braj Bhasha, the regional dialect of Rajasthan to compose her verses. This was a strong tool of resistance that in those periods, the devotional texts were only composed in Sanskrit, the elite class language. But Sanskrit was not accessible to the peasants, laymen and other general masses of the medieval days. They were denied of Sanskrit education. The regional dialectical

compositions of Mirabai helped them to comprehend the verses easily and it provided a universal appeal to her poetic excellence.

Spirituality acted as a suitable platform for the female Bhakti poets to express their Self and deny the social norms. Mostly, all the sacred texts strengthened the principles of complete surrender enjoined upon the female submissiveness, her chastity and surrender to the male. Even, the patriarchal norms, rites, rituals and customs from the use of purdah system to the attempt of Sati exploited the status of women in the society. The medieval society never provided any single opportunity for female autonomy of expressing their Self. It was only with the help of devotional sphere that they could break the chains of imprisonment and liberate their soul. They challenged the patriarchal conventions by expression their individual Self. The female saints, hence, emerged and represented a specific emotional configuration, manifested a specific societal association and were later of evoked as distinguished subalterns. The extreme devotion and underlying currents of feminism helped them to create a metaphysical or transcendental world mysticism and love that broke all the shackles of traditional societal codes. This feminine spark helped women in later days to develop a space of their own and give womanhood a new form distinctive from mere domestic roles like daughter, wife and mother. The area of women studies later developed with the seeds laid down during the medieval period.

Chapter 6

Recommendations

A detailed study on woman Bhakti poets are relevant as several problems and queries raised by them on the subject of feminine body, personal desires, emotional nature and individual self are hot topics for several debates in the contemporary socio-political, literary and academic set-up. It includes different societal and cultural ranges such as their religion, class, gender, etc. This thesis discusses on how these poets showcased their physical body and intense desires in their verses from sixth century AD till the end of the movement in the end of the medieval eras. The similar issues have considerable importance in the contemporary age too. A woman and her physical sexuality are major matters of arguments even today. Her public life, dressing style, professional choice and so on are cross-examined by the masculine world. The socio-political, literary and cultural circles of contemporary society express difficulties in interpreting female body and her erotic desires.

The thesis can be enlarged on adding further studies by selecting any single poet from the entire Bhakti literary scenario and analysing his/her complete lyrics. Also, more poets, both male or female, can be added to this spectrum apart from the four selected poets. A comparative study on the differences found in the manifestation of physical body by male poets and female poets who lived in the same periods can also be conducted. Physical body portrayed by male poets and female poets may contain many differences. Apart from analysing physical and gendered body other significant categories such as religion, caste, their interrogations in regional politics, use of language and vernacular dialects, life style, other medieval anarchies, etc., can also be included.

As mentioned earlier in the first chapter, religion and caste were the major problems raised by Bhakti poets during their days. They directly raised questions against the upper class hegemony of the state. Some of them commented in the state political matters and firmly asserted their opinions and suggestions. They, at times, questioned the king. Their use of vernacular language was another significance. When the classic poets used elite languages like Sanskrit, Bhakti poets relied upon vernacular dialects to express their thoughts. Some of them were family man/homemakers whereas some others were spiritual saints and solo wanderers. Other medieval anarchies including Sati was also questioned. These areas can be further developed and enlarged into more detailed studies on Bhakti poetry and poets.

Conclusion

The medieval women lived according to rules and norms built by the patriarchy. The society was designed in order to satisfy the male rules and there were strict codes of conduct and it was hard for a woman to stand for her rights against the social injustices implicated upon her by the macho word and associated institutions. The courage to protest and violate these so called 'social standards' were must. In this aspect, the Indian mystical realm opened a wider space with love and devotion as the core themes for the mental support, liberation and autonomy of women. Many medieval women resorted to the sphere of mysticism and this resulted for their liberation from the orthodox shackles. Karaikkal Ammaiyyar, Andal, Akka Mahadevi, Lal Ded, Janabai, Muktabai, Bahinabai, Kanhopatra, Mirabai, Sahajobai and so on are the examples of the female Bhakti cult. They emerged as the pioneers of what is today known as Indian Feminism and laid down the seeds of female autonomy. They are regarded as the first feminist voices by demanding and asserting a space for their own through their poetry. They were prominent revolutionary voices which strongly refused to the established patriarchal norms and hence setting a platform of defiance through lyrical compositions at multiple levels. This thesis dealt with the verses of four such women mystics namely Andal, Akka Mahadevi, Lal Ded and Mirabai, who selected their path of mysticism and left their great influence upon the psyche of common people and shaped an eternal space for themselves in this conventional society. The problem of the research was how one can consider a poet from sixth century and eighth century or eleventh century under the same genre of Bhakti as they four come from different geographical regions and time spans. The aim of the research was to find out what binds them altogether. Later, after the detailed textual analysis of each poet, it is found that the concept of body and desire in devotion that made these four poets to come under the same umbrella of Bhakti. The

methodology adopted for the research was Gender studies. Translated lyrics of each poet along with the secondary materials about their works are studied in detail.

The thesis is divided into five chapters along with an Introduction and Conclusion. The first chapter traces the beginning, growth and development of Bhakti movement throughout India in detail. The second chapter deals with the theory of body and its association with culture and religion. The third chapter brings out an exclusive analysis of the lyrical compositions of Andal and Akka Mahadevi. As a continuation to that, fourth chapter is a complete analysis of the verses of Lal Ded and Mirabai. The fifth and final chapter is about the theme of resistance and how these female mystics associated their physical body and carnal desires with the concept of medieval resistance by bringing out the significance of feminine freedom and agency.

The first chapter titled “On Devotee and Deity: An Introduction to Bhakti Literature” of the thesis begins by locating the vast history of Indian Bhakti tradition, both as a social movement and as a particular branch of Indian devotional poetry. The chapter primarily concentrates on the growth and development of Bhakti cult beginning from its early days in Tamil Nadu (medieval period) till the end of Mughal era and beginning of British rule. It also discusses on significance and relevance of using regional and vernacular languages in the devotional hymns by discarding the usage of elite languages like Sanskrit used by Brahmins. The chapter continues to explain Bhakti as a pan Indian counter-cultural movement that lasted for several centuries. It provides information on devotional cults including major sects such as Saivism and Vaishnavism across the country and how these religious sects became vital parts of India’s renaissance movements. The chapter also mentions the major literary figures of the movement from various geographical locations of the country spanning from sixth century to seventeenth century by analysing the similarities of Bhakti hymns with that of

other Indian folk traditions. The rebellious notion of Bhakti in describing different human relationships are also discussed. The relation of Bhakti hymns with that of the teachings of other Asian religions including Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism are also defined in detail. Towards the end of the chapter, the reading on D. D. Kosambi's article provides further details on Bhakti movement, in association with Marxist theories and ideologies that relates Bhakti cult with Indian economic scenario. This chapter is an attempt to build a comprehensive retrospection on medieval Indian Bhakti by portraying those philosophies from major writers and social analysts such as P. Govinda Pillai, Shahabuddin Iraqi, A. K. Ramanujan, Arundhati Subramaninan, Andrew Schelling, Hiren Gohein, Pandit Nehru and so on.

The second chapter, "Being Woman: Theoretical Speculations on Female Body in Medieval India" completely discusses female body and its relation with the social community, political structure, literary culture and religious conventions. The chapter begins by a discussion on how the physical body of a female along with her bodily experiences forms her literary output. It also defines how a female existed in the socio-political context of medieval period and how she reacted against those patriarchal anarchies that strictly imposed restrictions on her feminine freedom, mental psyche and individual identity. The chapter continues to describe how the social, political and cultural spheres of East and West describes a feminine body from ancient days. It also locates how religions all over world such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Islam, Christianity, etc., observed woman and her feminine body in respect to the existing social, cultural and spiritual environments. The individual identity of a woman was always a strong matter questioned by the society she lives and her physical body was a crucial subject for social and religious contamination. Pregnancy and motherhood were always regarded as the only grading measurements of a woman's dignity. This indirectly

made her passive and submissive to the masculine world. It was her physical sexuality that marked her an all-time wife and mother. But, here the same sexuality itself makes her a strong tool of agency, autonomy, freedom, strength and courage. The chapter puts forward the significance of human physical body and how Bhakti poets used their body as a tool of resistance against masculinity in medieval India. The feminine body, its physical desires and its nudity always stood as a great threat to men and their conventional systems. Towards the end, this section also explains the significance of women saints and how they enlarged their individual space and transcended their physical body. They tried to defeat the traditional religious beliefs about feminine body and announced that it is never an obstruction to the society or inferior to human psyche. In contrast, it's a clean abode of human intelligence, knowledge, emotions, creativity, and enlightenment. The second chapter deals with the theory of feminine body and its association with medieval culture and religion. It discusses the statements of several theorists such as Judith Butler, Margaret Mead, Nivedita Menon, Madhavi Menon, Jasbir Jain, Professor Udaya Kumar and many others.

The third chapter titled “Desiring Devotees: An Analysis of Early Bhakti Poets — Andal and Akka Mahadevi” is solely dedicated to the lyrical analysis of Andal and Akka Mahadevi, the major female saint poets of earlier periods of Bhakti movement in South India. They passionately desired for unification with their favourite deities, Lord Vishnu and Lord Shiva respectively. The first half of the chapter describes the life, works and the lyrical analysis of Andal, the Tamil Alwar saint of 8th century. Her works, *Tiruppavai* and *Nacciyar Tirumoli*, are thoroughly analysed from the perspectives of female body and physical desires. The concept of Bridal Mysticism (*Madhurya Bhava*) of Andal is defined with lyrical examples from these poems. Andal explains the importance of undertaking periodical vow (*pavai nombu* of *Margazhi*

month) and preserving physical cleanliness. According to Andal, the portrayal of her physical body was a strong means of her individual protest that finally lead her towards the eternal transcendence. Her lyrical manifestations of sensual love and bodily desires towards her beloved lover was a subject of severe shock to the medieval ‘moralists’. The second half of the chapter then moves on to discuss the poet Kannada poet Akka Mahadevi, another ‘problematic’ figure of the Bhakti tradition. Like Andal, she also followed the path of Bridal Mysticism in her lyrics, but in a much more revolutionary style. Apart from her powerful verses, dominant actions and threatening lifestyle, she was a solo wanderer who fashioned several social and cultural revolutions in 12th century Karnataka. Her verses are described from the side of a woman who directly questioned the patriarchal society by revealing her physical nudity and distinct soul. A complete study of her lyrics (*vachanas*) shows that her in-depth desire and devotion towards her Lord, is the result of her sheer conditioning. Her lyrical compositions are comprised of strong erotic imageries, symbols and metaphors of their sexual union originating certainly inside her heart. Towards the end of the chapter, brief details on Lingayat tradition and Veerasaiva movement are also explained in the backdrop of Akka Mahadevi, who herself was born and brought up as a Lingayat girl and then later questioned the injustices inside the same sect. This chapter brings out an exclusive analysis of the lyrical compositions of Andal and Akka Mahadevi. It is framed with the substantiating accounts of Archana Venkatesan, Alka Tyagi, A. K. Ramanujan, Mukunda Rao and so on.

The fourth chapter “Body and Beyond: An Analysis of Later Bhakti Poets — Lal Ded and Mirabai” discusses about the life and verses of later medieval female saint poets, who were ardent devotees of Lord Shiva and Lord Krishna respectively. This chapter primarily aims at analysing the love, body, emotions, and passion contents in the

verses of these mystic poets of North India. Those solid expressions of physical body and desire manifests their strategies of freedom, courage, agency or autonomy. The first half of the chapter focuses on Lal Ded and her verses (*vakhs*). They are philosophical teachings rendered by a female mystic who travelled beyond physical body and personal desires. Those *vakhs* carries peace and harmony. Lal Ded focused more on the theme of emptiness of human body rather than on concentrating on bodily flesh and carnal desires. Therefore, her verses signify the physical as well as the metaphysical. The poetic excellence of her lyrics automatically transit from that of a sage to an expert, from a priest to that of a passionate and dedicated lover and finally to that of a pure female yogini who is in search of eternal bliss or transcendence. Her verses are straight expressions of her spiritual visions and the talents of a brilliant mystic, who was always attentive to the powerful spiritual fragments of medieval society and the spiritual concerts of Kashmir Saivism. In her verses, the human physical body occupies chief importance as it is the nucleus of all her spiritual experiments in self-refinement. She demonstrated human love and peace all along her verses. The chapter next moves on to discuss the next poetic saint, Mirabai, the most celebrated female mystic saint of Indian devotional poetry. Her love lyrics (*padas*) on Lord Krishna (Vaishnavism) reveals the embodiment of 'prema bhakti' and are regarded as eternal classic songs of medieval Indian literature. The songs of Mira transform an enthusiastic devotee to the mood of transcendental delight or ecstasy. They express the cry of an ardent devotee from the inner soul, melancholic, with deep desire for profound love to embrace eternity. Mira's songs created space for those voices that could not be voiced in her days. Those songs were spontaneous reflections of pure love melodies that developed from the core heart of a passionate lover, who longed for her Beloved all along her life. Humanity in its supreme form is observed in the songs of Mirabai. Like the other female mystics of

devotional poetry, Mira also strongly states her intense desire for the unification with her lover, Lord Krishna. Towards the end of the chapter, her delicate feelings, sentiments and the passionate desire to join with her Beloved is expressed evidently in her verses. Mira's lyrics prove that she was an obedient lover possessed by mad love. Her verses carries erotic images and metaphors in relation with feminine body and desires. Mira directly manifested her love towards Krishna in a straight language filled with personal emotions, feminine sentiments and carnal desires. Her songs are individual manifestations that carried passionate depth of her liberal love in its highest forms. Poets, translators as well as thinkers including Ranjit Hoskot, Andrew Schelling and Pradeep Trikha aided in framing the major judgements associated with these songs.

The fifth chapter titled "Body and Resistance: Re-Contextualizing the Works of Female Bhakti Poets" is a long discussion combining the different ideas of female resistance present in the verses of the four selected poets, Andal, Akka Mahadevi, Lal Ded and Mirabai. This chapter reveals the unheard voices of dissent, protest and resistance from the parts of these medieval mystical poets. The beginning of the chapter shares the notion that resistance struggles held by women is far different from that of the vigorous rebellions or agitations of men. History defines resistance struggles as those revolutions organised by the passive divisions of the society particularly women, labourers, farmers, laymen and so on. Here, in Bhakti poetry, these female mystic poets composed their love lyrics in relation with their individual experiences and personal desires. They placed their physical body as the major tool of their resistance. This body, apart being a resistance device, also becomes a strong platform for the celebration of bodily pleasure. The passionate desires, deep and ardent love, sexual cravings, etc., formed the major subjects of their lyrics. The accurate organisation of these themes in the backdrop of Indian devotion poetry marks them different from other medieval Indian

poets. Their passionate dedication and love towards their favourite deity and the unending desire and passion to unite with him forms the core of their lyrics. This physical as well as metaphysical unification with the lord that travels within body and beyond body signify their ways of resistance against the feudal norms of patriarchy and religious conventions. This sensuality in their verses forms the nucleus of their resistance struggle. These poets celebrated their own physical body and bodily desires. The chapter further moves on by defining how these medieval mystic saints treated their physical body. For, them, it was never a burden or liability, but an abode filled with eternal happiness, pleasure and celebration. Andal, being an ardent lover and mystic poet of medieval period conveyed her passionate love in a social space through her lyrics. This public declaration of physical love and carnal desires were great shock to the patriarchal system of her days. The highly erotic elements present in her lyrics, particularly in *Nacciyar Tirumozhi*, makes her a strong rebellious woman who directly defined her intense personal desires and bodily cravings. The feminine body she possessed, her passionate love towards her Beloved and the grief of separation she felt when he left her constitute Andal's love verses more and more rebellious in its structure. Similarly, Akka Mahadevi, the Veerasaiva poet, was a complete rebel of her times who continuously tried to break the shackles of the masculine world. Being born and brought up as a Lingayat follower, she firmly stood under the same spiritual sect and questioned the anarchies inside Lingayatism. Her powerful verses describe the celebration of her feminine body and her deep physical desires which were great social taboos during medieval eras. On the other hand Lal Ded, the Kashmiri mystic, arranged her verses in the forms of philosophical teachings and these teachings (*vakhs*) were the tool of her resistance against patriarchy. Through her lyrics she questioned the consumerist attitude of medieval man. Also, she chose her literal terms, images and metaphors from her

nearby surroundings and domestic lives of common masses, which broke the medieval style. Her *vakhs* prove that by withholding the human physical body and its carnal desires, she could easily open a world of metaphysical body in the state of transcendence. Lal Ded tried to promote ordinary medieval women from their domestic lives of just being wives and mothers into another wide sphere where they can express themselves. She sang and danced in complete ecstasy. Towards the end, the chapter discusses on Mirabai, the most well-known mystic saint who conveyed her love in the form of *dasya bhava*. She touched the top of her feminine defiance when her ardent love was questioned by her Rajput family. Her melodies has noble roots and an elite genealogy. Still, her songs, stood for the women in general, the women caught in love. She consciously used personal phrases including ‘I’, ‘I am’, ‘I have’, etc. in her songs to indicate her mental strength to express her female, mental psyche, individual self and agency. Her songs carries the images of an imaginary world around her. Mira in fact struggled against this fantasies and myths of the society. The whole chapter is framed with the intention of exploring the relations between feminine body and resistance. Susie Tharu, K. Lalitha, Alka Tyagi, G. Mohana Charyulu, Sucheta Sankar, Dr. Sarada Thallam, Leela Mullatti and so on are the major thinkers and theoreticians who worked on medieval female writings. The verses of female mystics and its cultural significance are presented with substantiating comments from them.

The major finding that have emerged as a result of the Doctoral Study include the relocation and reinterpretation of the verses of women mystics helped in creating a wider space for the marginalised voices of medieval Indian literature. The concepts of personal devotion, passionate love and supreme surrender are evident in women mystics as these concepts together comprised their politics of resistance. Also, the sensibility of the women poets are frequently discordant with that of their contemporary male poets as

according to them, discourses on physical body and gender is as important as the caste and creed issues raised by the male poets. These poets of Bhakti movement could be regarded as the pioneers of Indian feminism as the contemporary persistence of the freedom, agency and autonomy of every Indian woman has its reflections from the voices of these medieval female mystics. These poets were later considered 'outcaste' in the mainstream realm as their verses carried eroticism, carnal desires and nudity. Talking about feminine body and bodily desires became the powerful weapons of resistance against the medieval patriarchy, traditional beliefs and conventional ideologies of the masculine world. Hence, the female poets successfully created a space in Indian mainstream literature by expressing their passionate love, sexual desires and personal emotions. The portrayal of day-to-day life and domestic household chores of medieval women as strong metaphors in the mystical poetry was another notable feature of female Bhakti saints.

A study on female Bhakti poets is still significant as the questions raised by them regarding feminine body and individual self are still hot topics for debates in the contemporary academic scenario. It involves diverse social and cultural areas such as religion, class, gender and so on. The thesis discussed how these poets showcased their physical body and sensuous desires in their lyrics from sixth century till the end of the movement. The similar issues have substantial significance in the contemporary period too. Woman and her sexuality are major topics of arguments even today. Her communal life, dressing style, profession and so on are interrogated by the male patriarchy. The socio-political, literary and cultural spheres of contemporary society express difficulties in interpreting female body and her erotic desires.

Further studies can be conducted by selecting any single poet from the entire Bhakti literary scenario and analysing his/her lyrics. Also, more poets can be added to

this spectrum apart from the four selected poets. A comparative study on the differences found in the manifestation of physical body by male poets and female poets who lived in the same periods can also be conducted.

The idea of resistance put forward by the Bhakti poets in general and the female Bhakti poets in particular is relevant in the contemporary socio-political scenario. The common thread that binds the female writers under the umbrella of Bhakti movement is the idea of body and its representations in their poetry. Each of the four selected poets—Andal, Akka Mahadevi, Lal Ded and Mirabai—represent the concepts of body, eroticism and spirituality in their own unique ways. The works of these poets carry many rebellious ideas that question the existing norms of their respective societies and contain their own attempts to find new answers regarding issues of gender and other struggles during their times. Their poems are powerful tools of resistance that constantly interact with the social systems of their age and conduct deep inquiries into the society's psyche to unveil the evils and injustices of patriarchal society. The issues raised by these poets are still relevant because such issues continue to exist even today. Thus any contemporary study on the female poets of Bhakti literature that problematises body and gender should be regarded as a political activity.

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