

BEGC-132
Selections From Indian
Writing: Cultural
Diversity

Block

1**Plurality and Cultural Diversity**

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EXPERTS COMMITTEE

Dr. Anand Prakash

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Mr. Ramesh Menon

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Director (SOH).

IGNOU FACULTY (ENGLISH)

Prof. Malati Mathur

Prof. Nandini Sahu

Prof. Pramod Kumar

Dr. Pema Eden Samdup

Ms. Mridula Rashmi Kindo

Dr. Malathy A.

COURSE COORDINATOR

Prof. Malati Mathur
School of Humanities
IGNOU, New Delhi

BLOCK PREPARATON

Course Writer

Dr. Hema Raghavan

Block Editor

Prof. Malati Mathur
School of Humanities, IGNOU

PRINT PRODUCTION

Mr. K.N. Mohanan
Assistant Registrar (Publication)
MPDD, IGNOU, New Delhi

Mr. C.N. Pandey
Section Officer (Publication)
MPDD, IGNOU, New Delhi

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COURSE INTRODUCTION

The course will take up writing by Indian writers both in English and in translation which will give learners the opportunity to access the thoughts and work of regional writers as well. It will cover a variety of genres like criticism, stories and poetry while addressing highly relevant issues such as the politics of language, writing about/from marginalised groups/communities and women's perspectives. It envisages the opening of a window through which learners can glimpse the rich legacy of the Bhakti and Sufi movements and journey into the modern world as they read representative writing from living authors with a contemporary world view. The course will study writers and critics like Sujit Mukherjee, Sisir Kumar Das, Amrit Rai, MK Naik, Nabanita Deb Sen, Tillotamma Mishra, Eleanor Zelliot, Bulleh Shah, Akka Mahadevi, Meera, Raghuvir Sahay, Ayyappa Paniker, Kynphem Sing Nongkynrih, N.T. Rajkumar, Lakshmi Kannan, Pudhumaipithan, Indira Sant and Naseem Shafaie.



BLOCK I PLURALITY AND CULTURAL DIVERSITY

This Block deals with the need to develop a new methodology to write Indian literary history that takes into account the multiple Indian languages, their literary traditions and their mutual influence on one another. It will make the learner aware that there is the running undercurrent of one single Indian literary tradition among all these different Indian languages and literatures. An illustration is the two distinct Movements - the Bhakti and the Sufi movements of the pre medieval and medieval periods which are very similar in their approach to God. This observation is underscored by three samples of devotional songs from medieval Indian poetry - one from Bengal, another from Karnataka and the third from Rajasthan.



UNIT 1 ‘PROPOSITIONS’ BY SUJIT MUKHERJEE

Structure

- 1.0 Objectives
- 1.1 Introduction
 - 1.1.1 Analysis of the Points Listed in the Introduction
- 1.2 About the Author, Sujit Mukherjee
- 1.3 Some Excerpts from Sujit Mukherjee’s ‘Propositions’
- 1.4 The Need for a New Methodology to write Indian Literary History
 - 1.4.1 Textual Analysis
- 1.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 1.6 Aids to Activities
- 1.7 Glossary
- 1.8 Unit End Questions
- 1.9 References and Suggested Reading

1.0 OBJECTIVES

By the end of this unit, you will be able to

- understand why Sujit Mukherjee wants a new methodology to write Indian literary history
- learn about his new methodology, taking into account the numerous Indian languages, their literary traditions and the multiple mutual influences of Indian languages on one another
- discover the running undercurrent of one single Indian literary culture among different Indian languages and literatures

Words in **bold** are explained in the **Glossary**

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Eminent scholars and commentators have criticized the step motherly treatment given to Indian literary studies and traditions vis-à-vis Western literature and culture in our universities and have attributed this lapse to four reasons:

- 1) The colonial hangover resulting in love for western culture and a continuation of English studies to the neglect of studies in Indian culture and literature.
- 2) The emphasis on ‘modernity’ that has diminished the importance of Indian literature which is mistakenly viewed as an ancient tradition and therefore anti-modern.
- 3) The advent of print technology that has privileged written texts over the rich Indian oral literary traditions that include folk and tribal literature
- 4) The application of Western literary **canons** that is not wholly applicable to Indian literary tradition

1.1.1 Analysis of the Points Listed in the Introduction

While there is a lot of merit and value in what has been said in defense of Indian literary and cultural traditions, all of it needs to be toned down with a more **catholic** and liberal approach in tune with the distinctive Indian culture of pluralism. It is not true that all that is modern and western is unacceptable and all that is past and **indigenous** is glorious and exotic. Each has its distinctive tradition and a parallel study of the two traditions can enrich and broaden our understanding without necessarily giving one more importance than the other. Our Universities seem to be more in agreement with Kipling's famous phrase:

“Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet...”

The solution to root out this perceived bias and discrimination in favour of western tradition as against Indian tradition does not lie in ‘either/or’ but in ‘and’. It has to be inclusive.

Further, oral tradition and written texts are two distinctive genres. When you hear the word ‘literature,’ we usually associate it with books i.e., the written word. Before writing was developed, people still told stories and passed them on from generation to generation through oral storytelling traditions. Many classics of world literature, from *The Iliad* (the ancient Greek epic) to *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata*, (the classical Indian epics) were passed down orally before being written down. The earlier process of transmitting the epics orally from one generation to the next is known as the oral tradition. The oral literary tradition has survived many ages and is today preserved as written texts in multiple forms and languages. This is again another instance where two distinct genres enrich each other. Valmiki's *Ramayana* in the oral tradition is as inspiring and poignant as Tulsidas' *Ramcharitmanas* composed in Hindi/Awadhi and Rajagopalachari's *Ramayana*, written in modern English. Today we have not one, but many *Ramayanas*, each with its own cultural context and frames of reference. There are many great poets such as Kamban, Kritibhasa, Tulsidas and Eknath, to name a few, who have composed and retold the story of the *Ramayana* in their own language with examples drawn from local cultures and embellishing the story with interesting local flavours, all the while paying homage to Valmiki as the *adi kavi*, (the first poet) and also feeling free to create on their own. This is how oral tradition has been continuously nurtured in Indian society and its tradition preserved in written texts.

Activity 1

How many versions of the *Ramayana/Mahabharata* have you come across in the written/oral/performative forms? Do you notice any changes from the original story? Make a note of what you think are different whether in terms of characterization or narrative.

What is meant by Western literary canon? The Western canon is the body of Western literature besides Western classical music and works of art that represent high culture. ‘High culture’ in the Western context means the set of cultural products - both literary and artistic - held in the highest esteem by the literate and aristocratic classes of Europe and North America. Broadly speaking, it represents a certain Western intellectual tradition that continues from ancient classical times to the present. High culture refers to the tastes and preferences of the elite of

society in contrast to that of popular culture that has a mass appeal. The word 'canon' is derived from ancient Greek *kanōn*, meaning a measuring rod, or standard and is applied as a test to judge the quality of any literary work. Since our tradition and culture are different from that of the West, it is infeasible to apply Western canons to understand and assess Indian literature.

Sujit Mukherjee's essay 'Propositions' is an attempt to write a different kind of literary history other than the chronological narrative of English /Western literature, to sensitize the reader to the difference between the two distinctive literary traditions and find a new methodology to write Indian literary history.

Activity 2

How do you differentiate high culture from popular culture in India? Give two examples from each one of them.

1.2 ABOUT THE AUTHOR, SUJIT MUKHERJEE

Sujit Mukherjee (1930-2003) was a writer, critic, publisher and translator. While his academic writing is mainly in the area of Indian literary history and translation, his non academic writing includes six books on cricket, the most widely known being the *Autobiography of an Unknown Cricketer*. This book captures the romance of cricket played in unknown places and gives us an idea of what it meant to lay the foundation of a sport which has grown into one of the most popular games in the country. He has translated books from Bangla into English that include Tagore's *Gora* and Buddhadeva



Bose's *Mahabharater Katha* which he titles *The Book of Yudhishter*. As a critic, his two works on *Translation as Discovery and Translation as Recovery* need special mention. His other books are *The Tradition of Anglo-Indian Fiction and Towards a Literary History of India*. The best tribute to Sujit's qualities of head and heart is in the form of a quotation from his students in Australia - the Goonaratnes - and quoted by Prof.Sachidanand Murthy :

... they told me you were dead,
They brought me bitter news to hear and bitter tears to shed.
I wept as I remembered how often you and I
Had tied the Sun with talking and sent him down the sky.

1.3 SOME EXCERPTS FROM SUJIT MUKHERJEE'S 'PROPOSITIONS'

- The simultaneous presence of several literary languages is probably as true of our ancient literary culture, as it is of the middle and modern phases and any new model of literary history we hope to construct ought to be able to accommodate this fact.
- ... writing a history of Sanskrit Literature up to about the 12th Century is easy (as Sanskrit was the predominant language till that time). It is when we

extend the review of our literary past down to the 20th Century, the **diachronic** strategy seems no longer valid for at least the last five centuries when we have had no single dominant language of literature, the literary achievements of which we can locate and link in chronological sequence.

- We need a broad spectrum view of our literary past as the basis of an alternative mode of literary history.
- We must learn to recognize a literary culture, not merely by the literary texts contained in it but also as an outcome of various other factors operating at that time and place.
- Once we are prepared to cross and re-cross language barriers in search of patterns of literary history, some preliminary explorations can be undertaken to see what meanings can be read into our literary past by deliberate rearrangement of the available material.
- Along with texts, authors are a matter of basic concern in literary history... in the history of Indian literature this concern gets underlined by the fact that texts of unknown authorship as well as authors of undiscovered texts abound in our literary heritage... (this will enable) to relate our literary culture to the makers of our literature.
- When a text belongs to the language of its composition and an author remains attached to the language of his mastery, a literary form can travel freely from one language to another. Hence a study of how literary forms have moved around in India will make a viable unit of exploration for literary history.
- As with literary forms, so with literary **conventions**, their spells of prevalence, or decline would become apparent when we pursue them from one language to another. That a dominant language of literature like Sanskrit transmitted - as English transmits now - its conventions to other languages give us an obvious line of enquiry. If conventions have passed from one modern language to another, that would... provide convincing grounds to regard all literature in India as a part of the same literary culture.
- There is yet another kind of affiliation which we may call tradition after qualifying the term suitably by attaching it to the primary text from which the tradition has descended... Purposeful research may uncover possibilities of one such **seminal** text, **germinating** other texts, the phenomenon we have called tradition here, and the presence of many such traditions would strengthen an integrated view of literature.
- Just as voices or instruments may differ, but Indian music retains its identity, similarly the languages may differ but need not disrupt the entity that is Indian Literature.

Activity 3

Do you think that the comparison with music is an apt one?

1.4 THE NEED FOR A NEW METHODOLOGY TO WRITE INDIAN LITERARY HISTORY

Sujit Mukherjee makes a special case for devising a new methodology to write the history of Indian Literature. Before we go into the details of why he wants a new approach to write Indian literary history, let us start with the question: "What is history?" The term *history* is a Greek term that means "to know". History is both the act of inquiry and the resulting knowledge from that inquiry. Thus history relates to the accounts of events arrived at by making inquiries. Histories are records of events, personalities, happenings etc., **preceding** this very moment and everything that really happened up to now.

Literary history is among the youngest in the history of histories. We have many categories of history - History of Nations, History of Religions, History of Wars, History of Races, History of People History of Philosophy, History of Empires, History of Class Struggles, History of Science... there are endless narratives of past events relating to a particular civilization, country, period, person, etc., usually written as a chronological account. In this long list of historical disciplines, History of Language and History of Literature are among the latest.

Activity 4

What do you think could be the broad heads under which history can be categorized?

It has been easy to write a British, French, Spanish, Italian, and American History of Literature because they are monolingual - i.e., there is just one language in which literary works have been written in these different nations. So when we speak of French literature, all literary works in the French language are chronologically listed and commented upon. This is true of English literature, European literature (literature relating to different European nations), American literature etc., where the language of the land is single and **homogenous**.

Here we encounter the first hurdle in writing a History of Indian literature since we have a multiplicity of languages and a still greater multiplicity of dialects within each language in India. The Indian languages have never remained as **stand-alone** languages and there is considerable mixing of languages and dialects that have contributed to their growth and enrichment. The sibling influence of sister languages and dialects on each other make for a **heterogeneous** literary tradition that is uniquely Indian. Hindi, for example, has a dialect called Awadhi and Tulsidas blended the two and this helped Hindi to develop dynamically.

By way of illustration, Sujit Mukherjee cites the example of the two great Indian epics - the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* that have been orally composed in many Indian dialects and written in almost all Indian languages with changes and embellishments to the original story. The two epics have been rendered in a variety of versions at different points of time and they offer a glimpse of the multicultural complexity that has contributed to a high level of creativity in Indian literary writings. The *Ramayana* narrative has had many types of retellings in different parts of the country in different languages like Kashmiri, Tamil, Malayalam, Telugu, Assamese, Bangla, Maithili etc. Guru Gobind Singh's *Ramavatar* has the neoclassical texture of Braj bhasha and it is mixed with Persian,

Punjabi and Hindi to make *Rekhta* - the precursor of modern Urdu. We have Jain and Buddhist versions of the two epics and also in Nepali and Mizo. The sustaining force of the *Ramayana* can be seen in one text with multiple renderings in numerous languages happening through different periods of time. These developments are not chronological, but have occurred at different times which make it difficult to think of Indian literary history as a linear structure, from beginning to end as on a straight line.

Activity 5

Do try to watch a performance of the epics enacted as dance and drama to experience the total effect of music, dance, costumes and setting to bring the rich literary epic on stage. How do you think this enhances the impact of the narrative? Write down your observations.

What makes the Indian literary tradition unique is that it consists of many strands and it is not easy and desirable to straitjacket all literary writings in India under a single literary tradition moving straight and steady through time from the past to the present. Further, it is a difficult task to write a comprehensive and chronological history of Indian literary tradition because there was no one single *major* language in India like English in Britain, French in France, German in Germany etc. In India different languages developed at different periods and this makes it an uphill task to attempt a chronological arrangement or period-wise historical narrative of Indian literature. Unlike the Western tradition where it is easy to write the literary history of nations that focus on a single language and where the literary currents have a linear flow through different periods of history, we cannot speak of a single Indian literary tradition but multiple traditions where the literary cross currents flow due to constant and frequent changing of cultural frames. In addition, the interface of language with politics has caused the rise of dominant languages and the fall of minor languages that got marginalized as dialects and subsequently erased from the Indian literary tradition.

Sujit Mukherjee's **rational** behind formulating a new methodology is founded on the fact that India has multiple languages and multiple literary traditions which cannot be successfully represented by one history of Indian literature. In the Introduction to the anthology, *Cultural Diversity, Linguistic Plurality and Literary Traditions in India*, the editors write: "Since language and literary traditions emerge from specific historical and political points of reference, they have to be studied from within their constantly changing cultural frames and not in isolation."

This is why Sujit Mukherjee seeks an appropriate critical approach that would reflect the unity in diversity and diversity in unity, characteristic of Indian Literary tradition. The essay "Propositions" seeks an overview of the indigenous context of a different kind of literary history.

1.4.1 Textual Analysis

Sujit Mukherjee starts with an illustration from classical Sanskrit drama to show how one language developed multiple components. Sanskrit drama of the ancient times employed three different usages for its three different types of characters. Sanskrit is a historical Indo-Aryan language and described as 'refined speech.' And thus in Sanskrit classical drama, the language in its pristine form was employed by the royalty and the educated class of priests who used it for religious

purposes. A derivative of Sanskrit is Prakrit which means ‘original, natural, ordinary’ and therefore Prakrit was the natural language of the common people. So in ancient Sanskrit drama, women were depicted as speaking Prakrit, while the third form, Apabrahmasa which means ‘off standard’ in speech i.e., low literary language, was used by the common characters. Both Prakrit and Apabrahmasa derived from Sanskrit. In any scene in a Sanskrit classical drama, we see the employment of all the three forms. According to Sujit Mukherjee, it is an index of a multi lingual society which simultaneously developed different languages within one language. In ancient literary culture, as well as in the middle and modern periods, we see a similar simultaneous development of many languages.

It is relatively easy to write a history of Indian literature till the 12th century as there was only one major language at that time and that was Sanskrit. But from the 12th to the 20th century, there was no single predominant language that could be identified, located and written about in chronological sequence. Many languages and their offshoots developed and it became imperative that any history of Indian literature should cover all these languages. So a single formula of tracing the history of one language could not be followed and that too in a diachronic way. Writing the history of Indian Language and Literature cannot be on Western lines, but has to be modified to record the development of literature written in all the Indian languages which are currently present, as separate histories of literature of individual Indian languages. Sujit Mukherjee gives the example of Tulsidas who has to be seen not as just a Hindi poet but as one who belongs to the **medieval** period and one who transcends that period to become a great poet of Indian literature of all times. Mukherjee writes:

Tulsidas is generally regarded as a great poet. For this greatness to be convincing, it ought to become apparent in an ascending degree of magnitude... first Tulsidas as a great poet of medieval India; second as great in the history of Hindi poetry; finally as a great poet of Indian literature (that is, considering all other Indian languages through time). These would seem to be the obvious orders of measurement in any Indian literary achievement... But given our present procedure, Tulsidas is evaluated mainly as a Hindi poet, the first (medieval poet) and the third (poet of Indian Literature) orders suggested here never received due consideration.

It is to be remembered that Indian literature is not to be seen as a vertical growth of one language from ancient times to modern times but as one that has extensive horizontal development branching into dialects and languages across regions. A comprehensive Indian literary history is different from the present volumes of history of individual languages. The former is a consolidation of all language literatures to identify a literary culture while the latter is language-specific in terms of time, trends, growth and decline. It is to be understood that a literary culture cannot be formulated only through literary texts without taking into account various other factors operating at any given time and place. For example, medieval arts (painting, music, architecture...) and literature were greatly influenced by the mystic, bhakti movement of that period. An inter-disciplinary approach that identifies the influence of all artistic and aesthetic factors in the composition of a text will enable the historian to read new meanings into our literary past and discover new patterns of literary history.

Activity 6

Identify your mother tongue and find out how many dialects it has given rise to.

A history of Indian Literature cannot ignore medieval Islamic Literature of the Indus region. The texts are not available in the original and even if so, it is not possible for the literary historian to read them all in the original and s/he has to be content with translations. The literary historian, unlike the literary critic does not attempt a comparative study of languages and literature. His/her concern is with the authors who have contributed to Indian Literature in any language. For the literary historian, details about the author are important as they will help to examine the place of the author in our culture and thus relate our literary culture to the makers of our literature.

When we attempt to **correlate** literary culture and history, we factor in all other historical developments of particular periods. The distinguishing aspect of Indian writing is its transformation from the classical concept of a writer to that of the Middle Ages and presently extended to our times in the modern period. In the early period it was believed a writer was invested with divine grace and therefore regarded as a creator of art and literature like God the Creator. But in the medieval age, the poet or the writer was both an artist and an individual among other individuals - a courtier, priest, warrior, king, lover etc. – in short, a committed member of his/her society and therefore their place in literary history has to factor in all these in addition to their literary output. Sujit Mukherjee writes: “It is easy to forget that a literary map of India would be just as extensive and varied as a political map or one showing the physical features.”

A literary text is to be seen in its two aspects: (1) the language in which it is written and (2) its form or genre. Literary form is not static; it is not rooted to one place or one language or one genre. It travels freely and gets adapted in other regions where a different language is used. This adaptation is prominent in certain categories such the gatha of Prakrit, the pada of Bangla, the vacana of Kannada etc. Many literary forms have thus undergone comprehensive transformations when adapted from one language into another. Also many literary forms have grown out of folk literature, while many other forms have been adapted from the West, in particular the novel which was first cultivated in Bengali literature and from there entered other Indian regional languages. So a literary history has to reckon not only with **itinerant** indigenous forms, but also with imported forms. Nazrul Islam’s Ghazals in Bangla have been influenced by Persian and Urdu. Though a Muslim, he also composed songs on Kali, the Hindu goddess - attesting to the fact that Indian literature was never insular in terms of religion. A good number of novels written at particular times in different Indian languages also show how they were social and political in content.

Literary forms that developed through cross fertilization also brought with them new literary conventions. A literary historian of Indian literature has to focus on the links between one regional convention and another. It is not that the basic forms varied, but the conventions supporting the forms changed. These conventions lend themselves to comparable links, but there are many conventions that stand uniquely alone. What is to be remembered is that the conventions grow out of literary forms that are the off-shoots of Indian languages.

Activity 7

What do you understand by “cross-fertilisation”? Can you think of any texts or artistic expression that has seen the influence of cross-fertilisation?

Just as in the 10th century all languages were overshadowed by Sanskrit, today in the modern times, the influence of English and Western thought seems to overshadow our indigenous literature. Indian literature today has the trappings of Western culture, alien to many of us except a few who have some degree of acquaintance with our own ancient Sanskrit culture as well. Hence a literary historian writing on the modern phase of Indian literature has to account for strong Western currents and an equally strong revival of our earlier conventions that are evidenced in modern Indian writing. As Sujit Mukherjee says:

All the same, in dealing with the modern phase, the historian must not be misled by the seeming sameness of Indian Literature in its submission to the West. Revivals of older conventions have taken place in areas where foreign influence is the most active, and the overlay of the new and the old has made it difficult than ever before to recognize the true identity of a current convention. Earlier Sanskrit and now English have transmitted their conventions to many Indian languages. Also the transmission of conventions within Indian languages is a clear proof that all literature in India form a part of the same literary culture.

Yet another linking point is the affiliation of Indian Literature to tradition. The innumerable literary texts in very many Indian languages follow from the original text from which tradition has originated.

We have earlier pointed out how the *Ramayana*, known as the ‘adi kavya’ (the first text) and regarded as the repository of human values has given rise to a number of distinguished literary works in Indian languages spanning from Kashmir to Kerala, from Bengal to Gujarat, from Assam in the North-East to the other southern states of Andhra, Karnataka and Tamilnadu. The literary map of India closely parallels the geographical map of India. This is true of the *Mahabharata* as well though re-creating the full text of the great epic has been difficult in view of its large proportions. But it has been a source book for many poets and playwrights to express through their poems and plays, the modern man’s predicament which as the epic presents, is only a human predicament that is true of all times and places...

Sujit Mukherjee concludes:

Mahabharata has sometimes been classified as itihasa purana. The more straightforward Puranas - Brahma, Pada, Visnu, Brahmavaivrata, ... twelve others as well as the eighteen minor puranas have nourished the literature in all our languages, with plot and character, theme and structure, image and symbol and in many other ways in which the collective memory of a race can serve its writers. Reaching us from even farther back is the northern heritage of the Vedic hymns, the prose of the Brahmanas and the Upanishadic dialogues, while the South has preserved the ten anthologies of sangam poetry.

Thus the literary historian attempting to write a history of Indian literature must deal with our permanent assets that have come down to us as heritage. Sujit Mukherjee thus concludes that Indian literature “is one entity but comprising many languages”.

1.5 LET US SUM UP

- Sujit Mukherjee makes a case for finding a new methodology to write a history of Indian Literature.
- India is a multi lingual society and literary developments in many languages have taken place from the ancient times to modern times through the medieval years. A literary history of India has to deal with all these multi-lingual developments
- These developments have taken place at different times and therefore we cannot write a history of Indian literature chronologically but have to find an alternative method that records all the changes.
- Each modern language is separate in its literary achievements and therefore each Indian language demands separate histories of literature. But this will mean splitting our literary heritage into a number of segments that may erase the unity of literary heritage that has blossomed into diverse literatures.
- What we need is a broad **spectrum** of our literary past to bring in a new alternative mode of writing our literary history.
- In this mode, the historian should factor in all contributory influences on a literary text such as music, arts, painting etc.
- New literary forms, new conventions have all to be investigated for the links between languages.
- The continuance of tradition can be seen in the innumerable literary texts that have arisen from our two basic epics the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. These texts differ from the original though the human values and human predicament that one sees in them can be traced back to the original texts.
- The conclusion is that the new mode of writing history of literature should not **obviate** the heritage of Indian literature which is a single entity and which has fostered the growth and development of many forms of literature in many languages.
- The underlying point of the essay is to write the history of Indian literature with the twin focus on unity of heritage and diversity of literature.

1.6 AIDS TO ACTIVITIES

Activity 1 : All regions of our country and even Indonesia have different versions of the epics which are oral, written or performed. *Pandun Ka Kara*, for example is one version which is sung in the Mewat area of Rajasthan.

Activity 2 : High culture is seen as something followed by educated people and includes classical literature and music. Popular culture is what

is followed and practised by a large number of people. It includes folk lore, songs, TV, radio etc.

Activity 3 : There is a pan-Indian sense of identity which runs through all the languages and our literature and in that sense, the comparison with music is an apt one.

Activity 4 : Political History, Diplomatic History, Cultural History, Social History, Economic History, Intellectual History.

Activity 5 : When we see something being performed, with sound effects, music, appropriate costumes and makeup, it leaves a greater impression on our minds and we remember it for a long time.

Activity 6 : For example, the major dialects of Marathi are Standard Marathi and the Varhadi dialect. Koli, Malvani Konkani has also been heavily influenced by Marathi varieties.

Activity 7 : Cross-fertilisation means a coming together and mingling of various influences. Languages experience this as do the arts. Think of popular film music – there are so many different influences like Western compositions and instruments, rap etc and which have given rise to a new form.

1.7 GLOSSARY

Catholic	:	(in this context) wide-ranging; all-embracing
Conventions	:	customs, practices
Correlate	:	compare, connect
Diachronic	:	study of changes in a language over a period of time (concerned specially with languages, as they change through time)
Germinating	:	generating, producing
Heterogeneous	:	not of the same kind, varied
Homogenous	:	uniform, of the same kind
Indigenous	:	original, native
Itinerant	:	wandering, travelling, roaming
Medieval	:	belonging to the Middle Ages (1000-1500 A.D)
Obviate	:	do away with, avoid
Preceding	:	coming before
Rationale	:	grounds, principle or fundamental reason
Seminal	:	ground breaking, original, contains ideas for future development
Spectrum	:	range, variety
Stand-alone	:	capable of standing independently, being complete

1.8 UNIT END QUESTIONS

- 1) What is the rationale behind Sujit Mukherjee's argument that the Indian literary historian needs a new methodology to write a history of Indian Literature?
- 2) What are the new factors to be kept in mind while writing a history of Indian Literature?
- 3) Discuss the terms "unity of heritage" and "diversity of Literature" with reference to Indian literary history.

1.9 REFERENCES AND SUGGESTED READING

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UNIT 2 ‘THE MAD LOVER’ BY SISIR KUMAR DAS

Structure

- 2.0 Objectives
- 2.1 Introduction
- 2.2 About the Author: Sisir Kumar Das
- 2.3 The Text – Excerpts from Sisir Kumar Das’ ‘The Mad Lover’
 - 2.3.1 Textual analysis
- 2.4 Let Us Sum Up
- 2.5 Aids to Activities
- 2.6 Glossary
- 2.7 Unit End Questions
- 2.8 References and Suggested Reading

2.0 OBJECTIVES

After a detailed study of this Unit, you will have

- a basic ideas of the Bhakti and Sufi movements in the **pre medieval and medieval periods**
- a concept of the Mad Lover as an obsession with God that establishes a close relationship between God and the worshipper.
- some idea of the linguistic plurality and the spiritual oneness in the Bhakti and Sufi movements that stressed the union of the individual with God (the union of the finite soul with the Infinite Over soul)

Words in **bold** are explained in the **Glossary**

2.1 INTRODUCTION

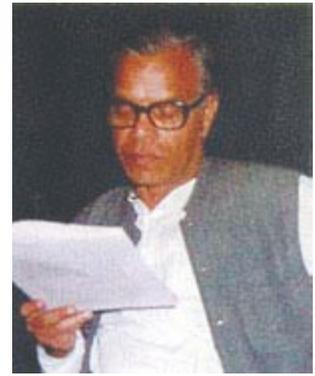
Let us refresh your memory. In the previous Unit (Unit 2) on Sujit Mukherjee’s ‘Propositions’, you learnt about the need to develop a new methodology to write Indian literary history that takes into account the multiple Indian languages, their literary traditions and their mutual influence on one another. In this process, you learnt that there is the running undercurrent of one single Indian literary tradition among all these different Indian languages and literatures.

In this unit you will see how Sisir Kumar Das illustrates the presence of a single literary tradition by comparing the two distinct Movements - the Bhakti and the Sufi movements of the pre medieval and medieval periods and discovers the many similarities in their approach to God. He discusses the common tradition of ecstatic devotion to God within their literary and historical contexts amidst the profusion of linguistic and cultural diversity.

2.2 ABOUT THE AUTHOR: SISIR KUMAR DAS

It is difficult to pack in this limited space, all details about Sisir Kumar Das who was a distinguished poet, playwright, essayist, translator and an academic scholar.

He was one of the pioneers in introducing Comparative Literature as an academic discipline. Instead of keeping individual literatures in **watertight compartments**, he introduced the comparative approach to the study of literature. He declared that “It is like that old saying: What does he know of English who only English knows. The literature departments have erected walls between literatures. New thoughts would start blowing only when these walls are shattered down.”



Sisir Kumar Das(1936-2003)

He was versatile in Bangla and English and his Bengali translations of Greek plays show his depth of understanding of the Greek theatre. His publications in Bangla include four volumes of poetry, six books for children, thirty-three plays and a collection of thirteen essays. In addition, he edited translations of Greek and German plays, poems of Chinese, Greek, Hebrew and English poets, and also prose works ranging from Aristotle’s *Poetics* to a biography on Emperor Akbar. He has around twenty publications in English. He held the distinguished post of Tagore Professor at Delhi University from 1980 to 2001 and also remained the president of the Comparative Literature Association of India (CLAI) from 1999 until his untimely death in 2003.

2.3 THE TEXT – EXCERPTS FROM SISIR KUMAR DAS’ ‘THE MAD LOVER’

The dominating note of Indian religious poetry in the medieval period is that of an **ecstasy**, a longing of the devotee for union with God and merge his identity with **Godhead**. In no other period of Indian history one finds so many saints and poets in different parts of the country, speaking different languages, practicing divergent rituals, belonging to different religious orders and yet behaving almost in an identical manner in their approach to God. The image... of a mad lover is the most conspicuous and the most recurrent imagery in the medieval religious poetry.

(The) Bhakti movement (in India) was a movement of the common people ... who revolted against the established religions and challenged the social conventions... The movement also voiced the joy of the liberated spirit. There was an abundance of emotion, emphasis on music, dance and poetry as a mode of worship, a discovery of the power and the beauty of the language of the people. The God of the Bhakti movement is no longer a **transcendent** and **immanent** reality beyond all comprehension and sense. It is a God close to the heart of the common man. At times the deity appears as a child and at times as a friend, and more often as a lover longing to meet his beloved.

The Islamic **mysticism**... or **Sufism** emerged almost at the same time in the Middle East... Rabia, the mystic of Basra (d. 801), who is generally considered to be the most important saint in the Sufi movement was also one of the first to enunciate the doctrine of divine love... similar to the nature of love as found in the Indian Bhakti poetry.

From the eleventh century onwards, sufi saints started exerting their influence on the masses in India, particularly in Sindh and Punjab. The Sufi poets flourished

between the thirteenth and the fourteenth century which coincided with the formative stages of the Bhakti movement in North India and also in certain parts of the South.

Sufism also started as a protest against the ruling class and against the rigidity of law. Sufism though rooted in the Quran, derived much of its inspiration from various sources - some of which were anti quaranic... Sufism distinguished by features such as the conception of God as love, its approach to God through love, its dependence on God's mercy, and its idea of **tawhid** and dhikr often appeared as anti quaranic in certain aspects. When Sufism came to India with its features of **fana, dhikr and sama** (singing and dancing), the doctrines of tawakkal ala Allah (total dependence on God's mercy), its emphasis on the role of murshid (guide) and its mashuq-ashiq (beloved-lover), the common Indian found them ... almost identical with his own.

Sufi thoughts were easily absorbed in (Indian) literary traditions...(Thus) Sufism when viewed in the wider perspective of Indian traditions should be considered as yet another tradition rather than what came from Persia...contributing a new dimension to the Bhakti movement...Sufi poetic tradition intermingled with Indian religious poetry and resulted in the creation of a new symbol (imagery of the mad lover) in Indian poetry and Indian religious life.

(Yet another similarity) is the ritual of dancing...creating an atmosphere of rapture and delight... the frenzy aroused by the chanting of the names of god, singing songs about divine love and by dancing, made the Sufi and the Indian saint equally conspicuous in the eyes of the people. {Sisir Kumar gives examples of women poet-saints, Meera from Rajasthan, Andal from Tamilnadu and Mahadeviyakka from Karnataka expressing their unrestrained love for God}.

The epithet 'mad' is not necessarily a **pejorative** one in the Indian religious context. In the sixteenth century we find this madness personified in Chaitanya. His contemporary Malayalam poet Ezhuttachchan was often called kallukudiyan (the drunken man) and the Sindhi poet Sachal was surnamed Sarman (the intoxicated one) Even Kabir... could not escape the frenzy of divine love. He sings:

I am not skilled in book knowledge
Nor do I understand controversy
I have grown mad, reciting and hearing God's praises
O father, I am mad, the whole world is sane
I am mad
I have not grown mad of my own will
God hath made me mad.

Activity 1

Why is 'madness' not associated with negativity in the context that Sisir Kumar Das refers to above?

It is sufficient for us at this point to remember that the devotional frenzy that dominated the Bhakti movement found its most congenial medium in the framework of love poetry.

The longing for the beloved as expressed in Mahadevi became the central theme in **Vaishnav** poetry in Bengali and Hindi, particularly in Maithili and reached its dizzy height in the character of Radha... In the song of the **Alvars**, of the **Virasaivas**, of Meera and Kabir, there is a personal and direct dialogue between God and the devotee. (Divine poetry) retained the flavor of a **secular** love poem and a familiar domestic situation...

The same process can be seen working in Sufi poetic traditions also. Sufi poetry attained a new dimension both in terms of poetic intensity and spiritual fervor when poets started exploiting secular legends involving characters deeply in love...The story of Mahmood, the king of Ghazni, and his slave Ayaz, though loathed by many...because of its **homosexual** overtones, became a model for religious love poems, eulogizing the total surrender and dedication of the lover to the beloved. Jalaluddin Rumi...also made the tale of Laila and Majnu a part of Sufi poetry. The emotional state of a Sufi in his religious quest finds a new **symbolism** in the ardent love of Majnun for Laila....The Sufis also took up several legends ...and transformed them into spiritual **allegories**. Maulan Daud...wrote *Chandayan*...in the Awadhi speech using the romantic tale of Lor and Chanda...it soon became a part of the prestigious literature of the Indian Sufis... Malik Mohammed Jaysi wrote *Padmavat*...in Awadhi, allegorizing the legend of Padmini and the siege of Chittor...

The emergence of Urdu as a fine instrument of literary expression was to a great extent accelerated by the Sufi poets... Urdu of all Indian languages is the richest mine of expression of spiritual love in the Sufi tradition...The poets of Punjab and Sindh drew their **symbolism** from the legends and romances of Heer and Ranjha, Sassi and Pannu, and Sohni and Mahiwal...The Heers and Sohnis in Punjabi and Sindh poetry can be said to be manifestations of Radha in a Sufi dress...In these legends one finds an authentic instance of interaction between the poetic tradition of the Sufis and that of the Bhakti movement. Bulleh Shah, often described as the Rumi of the Punjab...exploited diverse traditions of religions and poetry: his response to both Hindu and Islamic thought betrays his catholic temper...The soul's longing for the Ultimate, the basic doctrine of **Sufism** as well as the Bhakti movement finds a new form and a new image...Bulleh Shah created a new character of Heer, whose longing for God, the beloved, merged in the chorus of the devotees of Siva or Krishna...

The idea of the separation of the soul from God, developed into a love **symbolism** where the soul assumed the image of a mad lover. The union is the goal and the joy of the union is **ineffable**. But poetry lies in the process of the union than in the union itself... both in Sufi poetry as well as in the Bhakti poetry, it is the theme of longing and waiting for God, the theme of one's journey towards the beloved which dominates. Poetry is born out of the mad pursuits... In knowing Him...the mad lover as he approaches his beloved fills with a joy the like of which he has never experienced.

Activity 2

What was the new symbol that the Bhakti and Sufi traditions brought into the poetic discourse?

2.3.1 Textual Analysis

The essay makes three points.

- a) The recurring image of the mad lover in the Bhakti poetry of the medieval period and in the Sufi poetry of the same time.
- b) The similarity between the Bhakti and the Sufi movements in the context of ecstatic religious experience through the liberal use of secular legends, traditions, song and dance
- c) The ecstasy of a lover towards his beloved is the same as the ecstasy of the poet-worshipper towards God

All the three points reflect a heightened experience of rapturous delight and intense bliss that is almost **trance** like, as the poet-worshipper seeks his/her union with God. This state of **euphoria** is akin to being in a state of frenzied elation that cannot be rationally explained and it propels the lover to an ecstatic state which marks the summit (the height of joyous experience) of life, beyond which life cannot rise. Poetry is the spontaneous expression of intense feeling and emotion. If prose is the flow of reason, poetry is the flow of emotion. This kind of elation, almost mystic in its exaltation can best be summed up as a state of frenzy or madness.

Sisir Kumar Das illustrates the mad frenzy of total devotion and absorption in God through some of the well known Bhakti poets of the medieval period. As stated above, the characteristics of poetry are intensity of emotion and beauty. Usually it is an expression of intensely felt emotions of the poet. Bhakti poetry is lyrical poetry which expresses personal emotions or feelings, typically spoken in the first person. But here, we have two **protagonists** - the poet i.e., the singer or the addresser and God, the addressee. The poet is presented as a mad lover, an imagery that we come across frequently in medieval religious poetry. As for the addressee, i.e., God, He is no longer presented as an **abstract** god (existing only in the mind, non figurative) that the sages experienced in a state of trance and who therefore is neither visible nor comprehensible to the ordinary man, but as a God who is close to the heart of even the common man. God appears to the worshipper as a figurative God, sometimes as a child, sometimes as a friend, but more often as a lover desiring to meet his beloved.

The Bhakti movement was a movement of the common people who revolted against the shackles of social conventions and the authoritarianism of the Brahminical priests and scholars who ruled over the temples and thrust old, **fossilized rituals** and customs on the simple, naïve and ordinary men and women. The song of the Bhakti poets became the song of a liberated spirit which expressed joyous emotions through song and dance. The Saiva saints of Tamilnadu (worshippers of Shiva), Chaitanya and Meera are good examples of poets who used dancing as a means to express their ecstasy. Meera, charmed by her lover Krishna, defied all social conventions as she sang and danced in frenzied joy

Sanvare ke rang raci

saj singara bandh pag ghungaru lok laj taj naci

I have coloured myself in the colour of the dark hued one

Adorning myself and putting ghungharoos on my feet,

I gave up all the worldly rules and danced...

So did Chaitanya, whose trances and ecstasy earned him the **sobriquet**, *madamatta hathi* (raving like an elephant intoxicated with wine) and was spoken of as *unmatter pray prabhukare gannrtya* (the master sings and dances like a mad man). Tagore addresses him as mad *Nimai* (one who is filled with inner light). Similarly, the Malayalam poet Ezhuttachachan is often called *kallukudiyana* (a drunken man). We have referred to Kabir's song (see 2.3) to describe the frenzy of his divine love. Many women poet-saints like Andal and Mahadeviakka from South India expressed their unrestrained love uninhibitedly, choosing male deities like Krishna and Shiva as their husbands. They all subscribe to the descriptive identity of a mad lover. It is wrong to impute the term 'mad lover' as a negative and uncomplimentary term as it only describes a spiritual and emotional state that transcends rational understanding and analysis. There is a thin line that divides irrationality from non-rationality or trans-rationality.

Trans-rationality refers to an experience that is un-interpreted by rational or logical sense making while irrationality is being illogical or unreasonable. In short, while irrationality is that which does not lend itself to reason, trans-rationality is that which cannot be understood by reason. This is a fine and significant distinction. The mad lover's frenzy is a complete absorption in his or her object of love. It is a total identification between the lover and the beloved that cannot be affirmed by logic or reason. All the medieval religious poets in this sense were mad lovers.

Sufism - often cited as Islamic **mysticism** - arose at the same time in the Middle East and travelled to India. Just as the Bhakti movement revolted against the established Brahminical authority and the imposition of strict social conventions, Sufism with its emphasis on **asceticism** revolted against the reduced spirituality of the *Quran* to a rigid legal process because of Islamic priests and military expansion. Sufism developed as a protest against the ruling military and priesthood with its **proscriptive injunctions** without recognizing the *Quran's* conception of God as the embodiment of love and mercy. The great Sufi poet, Rumi sings about the twin attributes of God as the love (*mohabbat*) and ardent love (*Ishq*). *Ishq* became the key word in Sufi symbolism.

Sufism was similar to the Bhakti movement in making song and dance central to its praise of the Lord. Like the Bhakti poets, the Sufis conceptualized God as a **personification** of love and compassion, surrendered themselves totally to God's mercy (*tawakkul ala Allah*) and built their devotion on the idea of *mashuq-ashik* (beloved-lover). The attributes of God, the belief in God's mercy and the approach to Him through the concept of a lover and his beloved had an unmistakable parallel in Bhakti poetry. Thus it was easy to absorb Sufi thought into Indian literary traditions. The mystic madness we see in Indian women poet-saints is also seen in the Sufi woman poet, Rabia who refused to accept any one as her lover except God. This is just like Meera's absorption in Krishna and Andal regarding herself as Krishna's bride. Sufism thus became yet another Indian literary tradition. As a student of literature, it is essential to look at the way Sufi tradition was woven into Indian religious poetry. The fusion of the Sufi tradition and the Bhakti movement created a new symbol in Indian poetry and religious life.

Apart from the introduction of dancing, we find another similarity between the two traditions - the Sufi and the Bhakti - in their use of secular love and secular legends to provide a new dimension to poetic intensity and spiritual fervor. Even

the much reviled homosexual love story of Mahmood Ghazni and his slave Ayaz was adopted by the Sufi poets to express the spiritual **communion** or fellowship between the poet-worshipper and God. So did Rumi use the legend of Laila and Majnun as a part of his spiritual poetry. Sufi poets also took tales and legends prevalent among the Indian common people and turned them into spiritual allegories.

Activity 3

Why was it easy for the Indian poetic tradition to assimilate Sufi elements?

Related to this concept of the mad lover is the notion of ecstatic love that makes secular love no different from divine love. The aspiration of the earthly lover for a total union with his beloved is much the same as the spiritual aspiration of the poet –worshipper to unite with his/her lord. The theme of union is the common link between secular love and spiritual love. The experience of oneness – of two separate individuals embracing a single identity reveals the intense desire of a human being to become one with the Lord. This is the same as Heer’s sense of total identity with Ranjha.

Sisir Kumar Das quotes a couplet from Heer Ranjha about two identities becoming one, in which Heer says:

*Ranjha Ranha kardi ni mai ape Ranjha hoi
Sadhi ni mainu Dhido Ranjha Hir na akho koi.*

In translation it reads:

Repeating ‘Ranjha, Ranjha ‘ myself, I have become Ranjha
Call me Dhido ranjha, none should call me Hir any more.

There are other examples like the Bengali poet Ramprasad addressing Kali “Mother, I shall devour you” and the Virasaiva poet, Basavanna who sings:

Feet will dance
Eyes will see
Tongue will sing
And not find content
What else, what else
Shall I do?

The heart is not content,
What else shall I do?

Listen my lord.
It’s not enough
I have it in me
To **cleave** thy belly
And enter thee
O lord of the meeting rivers.

In a similar fashion, the Sufi poet Rumi sings of the separation of the human soul from God, where the soul assumes the status of a mad lover. He compares this separation with that of the reed flute that is cut from the reed bed and how it longs to get back to its original source

Harken to this reed **forlorn**

Breathing ever since 'twas torn
From its rushy bed, a strain
Of **impassioned** love and pain

The secret of my song , though near
None can see and none can hear
Oh, for a friend to know the sign
And mingle all his soul with mine.

'Tis the flame of love that fired me,
'Tis the wine of love that inspired me
Wouldst thou learn how lovers bleed
Harken, harken to the Reed.

These lines are from Rumi's poem 'The Song of the Reed' and is the first poem of Rumi's *Mathnavi* (*Masnavi-l Ma'navi*) which are known as the "Spiritual couplets" or "Rhyming Couplets of Profound Spiritual Meaning". You have earlier noted how Sufism used music and dance in its spiritual quest. The religious dance of the Sufis was known as *Sama* and the reed flute was an instrumental accompaniment to the *Sama* dance. Rumi symbolically presents the reed flute as the devotee of God. It becomes an instrument of music when it is cut ('torn') from the reed bed and it represents the human soul which in its music remembers its union with the Divine and a longing for a reunion after its separation. So the poet asks the reader/listener to harken - to be attentive to the reed flute that has been fashioned from the reed plant and which, through its music, tells the audience about the **impassioned** love and longing of the human soul to reunite with God. Like the reed that is cut from its reed bed, the poet has been separated from God and he longs to return to Him. Away from God, even as he experiences the flame of human love in the midst of the pain of separation from heaven, he has gained knowledge of the purpose of his existence. In short, his poems are meant to guide his readers towards the way to discover God. He says, God (the flame of love) has created him, and his work has been inspired by love among human beings (the wine of love). He asks the audience to understand how lovers 'bleed' to rejoin God. Here the word 'bleed' is used to indicate the pain of death, the separation from the world of love of his beloved but in death he attains eternal life by reunion with God. This quest for religious knowledge, this mystical journey towards the knowledge of God is through hearkening to the music of the reed flute that sings of human longing to return to the heavenly source from where the soul came into the world.

Sisir Kumar Das shows how Sufi poets and Indian religious poets were one in their intensity of love for God. The separation from Krishna made Meera leave her royal home and seek an everlasting union with the Lord and the same emotion made Chaitanya roll in ecstasy in Vrindavan. The essay 'The Mad Lover'

encapsulates the religious fervor and ecstasy of the poets of the medieval period irrespective of the religion they subscribed to. The editorial note to the collection of essays and poems in the text *Cultural Diversity, Linguistic Plurality and Literary Traditions* concludes by saying "Sisir Kumar Das explores the basic ideas of the Bhakti and Sufi movements through the metaphor of the mad lover found in poetry from different parts of India in the medieval and pre medieval periods."

Activity 4

From your reading of the excerpt and the textual analysis, what do you think is the most significant similarity between the Sufi and Bhakti movements?

2.4 LET US SUM UP

A study of the text of 'The Mad Lover' tells us about the

- concept of the mad lover as the ecstatic experience of the poet-worshipper in his/her search for a re-union with God
- application of this concept of mad lover commonly both to the Bhakti poets and the Sufi poets of the medieval period
- intensity of love between a lover and a beloved can well be extended to the impassioned love between human beings and God.
- secular love that is experienced by lovers in Indian legends like Heer Ranjha, Sohni Mahiwal, Lalia-Majnu as well as in stories with Sufi elements involving characters who are used to express the intensity of divine love
- transformation of the pain of separation of the human soul from God into symbolic love poetry where the human soul assumes the image of a mad lover.

2.5 AIDS TO ACTIVITIES

Activity 1 : The word 'mad' does not hold any negative connotations in this context as it describes the intensity of devotion.

Activity 2 : The new symbol that the two movements brought in was that of the mad lover.

Activity 3 : It was easy to assimilate Sufi elements into Bhakti as their attitudes, certain customs like song and dance and their concept and manner of addressing God was very similar.

Activity 4 : The greatest similarity between Bhakti and Sufi poetry is in their approach to God.

2.6 GLOSSARY

- Abstract** : incapable of being perceived by the senses, especially by touch
- Allegory** : The representation of abstract ideas or principles by characters,

Alvars	: Tamil Bhakti poet saints, whose name means immersed in
Asceticism	: The doctrine that through the renunciation of worldly pleasures, attributing symbolic meanings or significance to objects, events or relationships
Cleave	: split open, divide, slice
C communion	: affinity, sharing thoughts and feelings
dhikr	: remembering Allah
Ecstasy	: intense joy or delight, a state of exalted joy
Euphoria	: feeling of great joy or elation
fana, dhikr and sama	: fana means annihilation of the self, Sama means “listening”, while dhikr means “remembrance”. These rituals often feature figures or events in narrative, dramatic, or pictorial form
Forlorn	: disconsolate, miserable, helpless
Fossilized	: extinct, antiquated
Godhead	: the Almighty God
Hearken	: listen
Homosexual	: having a sexual orientation to persons of the same sex
Immanent	: indwelling, inherent, of qualities that are spread throughout
Impassioned	: filled with passion includes singing, playing instruments, dancing, recitation
Ineffable	: indescribable, inexpressible
Mysticism	: belief in or experience of a reality surpassing normal human
Pejorative	: disparaging, uncomplimentary, belittling
Personification	: representation, embodiment
Pre medieval and medieval	: period from the 5 th C to the 14 th C
Protagonist	: the principal character in a work of fiction or play
Proscriptive injunctions	: prohibitive commands or orders or directives
Secular	: Worldly, non-spiritual
Sobriquet	: a nickname, an affectionate or humorous name
Sufism	: the beliefs and practices of an ascetic, retiring, and mystical sect in Islam
Symbolism	: The practice of representing things by means of symbols or of poetry and prayers, wearing symbolic attire, and other rituals
tawhid	: oneness of God

Trance	: dream like state, hypnotic state
Transcendent	: beyond and outside the range of human experience and understanding or experience
Vaishnav	: Hindu sect worshipping Vishnu
Virasaivas	: Ardent devotees/worshippers of Lord Shiva

2.7 UNIT END QUESTIONS

- 1) What are the main points made by the writer in “The Mad Lover”?
- 2) How does Sisir Kumar Das illustrate the concept of the mad lover through the Indian Bhakti poets?
- 3) What is the common link established between Bhakti poets and Sufi poets? Give examples.
- 4) Elaborate on the use of secular legends and stories by the medieval religious poets belonging to the Bhakti and Sufi movements

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UNIT 3 BHAKTI AND SUFI MOVEMENTS IN MEDIEVAL INDIA

Structure

- 3.0 Objectives
- 3.1 Introduction
- 3.2 The Bhakti Movement in Medieval India
- 3.3 The Sufi Movement in India
- 3.4 Link between the *Upanishads* and the *Quran*
- 3.5 Bulleh Shah, the Sufi Mystic and Poet
 - 3.5.1 Bulleh Shah, an Apostle of Peace
- 3.6 Kafi, a form of Sufi poetry
 - 3.6.1 The Kafi Tradition
- 3.7 'Kafi 7' by Bulleh Shah
- 3.8 Analysis of the poem
- 3.9 Unity of Being: Meeting of Advaita and Sufi Philosophy
- 3.10 Let Us Sum Up
- 3.11 Aids to Activities
- 3.12 Glossary
- 3.13 Unit End Questions
- 3.14 References and Suggested Reading

3.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit introduces you to the Bhakti and Sufi movements in medieval India. Medieval poetry in India is mainly devotional poetry and comprises poems of both the Bhakti and the Sufi movements.

When you reach the end of this unit, you will have

- learnt about the common features of the Bhakti and Sufi Movements in Medieval India
- got to know Bulleh Shah, the Punjabi Sufi poet
- looked at the analysis of the poem “Kafi 7” by Bulleh Shah and
- become aware of the link between Advaita Philosophy and the Sufi philosophy.

Words in **bold** are explained in the **Glossary**

3.1 INTRODUCTION

As a sample of devotional poetry of the medieval period (belonging to both the Bhakti and Sufi traditions), this unit will introduce you to four poets in the third and the fourth units of this Block - Bulleh Shah (Punjabi Sufi), Baul Gaan (Bangla folk singers), Mahadeviyakka, often referred to as Akka Mahadevi (Kannada)

and Meera Bai (Rajasthani and Hindi). A reading of these poets will serve to reinforce the concept of India's plurality with the underlying bond of unity. The common thread of love and devotion that imbues these poems can teach us like nothing else can, that the richness of Indian culture is in its variety and diverse traditions which yet remain undoubtedly Indian to their core.

3.2 THE BHAKTI MOVEMENT IN MEDIEVAL INDIA

Let us first study the Bhakti movement, follow it up with a study of the Sufi movement and then see the connecting link between both.

The Bhakti Movement started in South India (Kerala and Tamilnadu) in the 8th C and spread to the North and East India from the 15th C and reached great heights in the 17th C. The Bhakti movement that resulted in a profusion of devotional poetry was a pan India movement, stretching from North to South, East to West by the end of 17th C. Though the movement can no longer be discerned after the 17th C, devotional poetry continues to be a part of Indian literature.

Though the Bhakti movement started in the 8th C, the word 'bhakti' was first used in the 1st millennium BCE, in the *Shvetashvatara Upanishad*, the *Katha Upanishad* and the *Bhagavad Gita*. The *Shvetashvatara Upanishad* is an ancient Sanskrit text embedded in the *Yajur Veda* and it is the basic text in which Vedanta philosophy, philosophy of Saivism and principles of Yoga have been delineated. The last of three epilogue verses of the *Shvetashvatara Upanishad*, 6.23, uses the word Bhakti as given under:

यस्य देवे परा भक्तिः यथा देवे तथा गुरौ ।
तस्यैते कथिता ह्यर्थाः प्रकाशन्ते महात्मनः

He who has the highest Bhakti (love, devotion of *Deva* (God), just like his *Deva*, so for his *Guru* (teacher),
To him who is high-minded,
these teachings will be illuminating.

— *Shvetashvatara Upanishad* 6.23 (on *Guru Bhakti*)

This verse is notable for the use of the word *Bhakti*, and has been widely cited as among the earliest mentions of "the love of God". *Bhakti* means an emotional devotion to one's personal God. *Bhakti marg* (the path of devotion) is one of the spiritual ways to attain *moksha* or liberation, the ultimate goal of spiritual development, a state of eternal bliss, transcending the worldly state. The word *Bhakti* is used in the *Bhagavad Gita* to denote a particular way to reach *moksha*.

Activity 1

What is the importance of the *Shvetashvatara Upanishad* in the context of the Bhakti movement?

The Bhakti movement swept across medieval India and most of the Bhakti poets sang with loving devotion to Rama and Krishna, the incarnations of Vishnu. This movement is significant as it not only produced great poetry, but it also marked the beginning of a rebellion against the superficial Brahminical customs

and rituals, caste distinction and discrimination prevalent in society. The Bhakti movement spread all over India through the songs of Kabir, Ravi Das, Meera Bai, Chaitanya and many other lesser known mystics. These saint-poets laid emphasis on Man's actions as these alone would lead to his salvation. They were called the Bhakti poets where the Sanskrit term *Bhakti* as used in the ancient texts denoted "devotion to, and love for, a personal god or a representational god by a devotee". The Bhakti poets sought to attain spiritual union with the Lord through their devotion by means of their soulful poetry.

Activity 2

Make a list of illustrious saint-poets of this period. Try to access some of their poetry in your mother tongue.

Let us take for example, Kabir's *Dohas* which had a profound impact on the Bhakti movement both as a social and a religious movement. As a social movement, it had a great influence on the common man. Kabir's simple message of love and devotion as seen in the couplet given below had a mass appeal:

Pothi padh padh jag mua, bhaya na pundit koye

Dhai akhar prem ka padhe so pundit hoye

One does not become a pandit (learned person) by reading voluminous books, but one can become one by understanding the two and a half letters which make up the word 'love' (*prem* as written in Hindi).

Kabir between 1440 and 1518, Saint Ravidas in the 15th C and Meera between 1498 and 1557 were among the most influential poets of the Bhakti movement with their twin messages that spoke of

- i) a loving relationship between a devotee and his/her personal god and
- ii) laid emphasis on devotion and individual worship of a god or goddess rather than performance of elaborate sacrifices.

What this implies is that the Bhakti saint-poets had a liberal outlook and their message focused on the devotee's choice of his/her and personal God and the freedom to worship in any way that was in consonance with their full devotion. The Bhakti moment thus conveyed a social message to the devotees.

Activity 3

What was the message of the medieval saint-poets of India?

From the north, the Bhakti movement spread to the East pioneered by Chaitanya Dev (1486-1534) who was revered as the greatest spiritual leader of Eastern India (Bengal, Orissa, Bihar and Assam) and as an incarnation of Krishna. In Punjab, Guru Nanak founded Sikhism and he was influenced by poets like Kabir, Ravi Das, Jaidev of Bengal, Namdev and Sufi Baba Farid. Thus the Bhakti movement was widespread from Punjab to Bengal and from Maharashtra to the Deccan. This shows how the Bhakti movement gradually permeated to the whole of India. We had earlier noted that the Bhakti movement started in the 8th C in South India.

Activity 4

Why do we regard the Bhakti Movement as a pan India movement?

3.3 THE SUFI MOVEMENT IN INDIA

During the period that saw the rise and spread of the Bhakti movement, India also saw the advent of Islam with the ascendancy of the Mughal empire that lasted between the 16th and the 19th century. It started with the ascension of Babur in 1526 and ended with the death of Aurangzeb in 1707. Within fifty years of Aurangzeb's death, this large Mughal empire started disintegrating. With weak successors to Aurangzeb, a near empty treasury, the rise of the regional princes of various Hindu kingdoms and the arrival of the East India Company that established the British rule, the Mughal empire came to an end. The last of the Mughal emperors was Bahadur Shah who was deposed and deported to Rangoon by the East India Company in 1757.

During the Mughal dominance, the Islamic religion of the conquerors remained hostile to Hinduism and was critical of its polytheism (worship of many gods), idolatry (idol worship) and practice of irrational rituals. With its focus only on the externalities of Hindu worship, Islam failed to understand and appreciate the core binding principle of Hinduism that accepted (and continues to accept and adheres to) multiple faiths and varied forms of worship practiced by different religions. It is this acceptance that forms the basis of the Hindu idea of universal brotherhood. But as antagonism increased between the two religions and resulted in mutual hatred and enmity, it was fortunate that there came a group of religious thinkers belonging to the Hindu Bhakti movement and the Islamic Sufi movement to bridge the divisiveness between the two religious orders and establish love and friendship, feelings of fellowship and fraternity among all people. The Sufi movement was a result of Hindu influence on Muslim religious thinkers who undertook an in depth study of *Vedanta* and the philosophy of Buddhism and Jainism, the two offshoots of Hinduism.

Activity 5

Why are the Bhakti movement and Sufi movements known as socio-religious movements?

The Sufi movement came to India two centuries before the Bhakti movement and spread among the Muslims. The Chishtiya Sufi order was established in India by Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti in the 12th century. He died in 1230. After his passing, his disciples carried the order forward, spreading his message of devotion to God and *sulhe-kul* (compassion and love for all). Notable among them were Hazrat Niamuddin Auliya and his famous disciple Amir Khusro (1253-1325), the Sufi spiritual poet and musician who had a deep impact on the society, literature and culture of India. Khusro is regarded as one of the champions of India's composite culture. He wrote many poems, *ghazals*, *dohas*, riddles and is also credited with enriching Hindustani classical music by introducing Persian and Arabic elements in it, and thus is known as the originator of the *khayal* and *tarana* styles of music. He is regarded as the "father of *qawwali*" (the devotional music of the Indian Sufis). The invention of the tabla is also traditionally attributed to Amir Khusro and so also the sitar. Kabir was greatly influenced by Khusro and some of his *dohas* are virtually translations of Khusro's couplets. Other Sufi

mystics were Khwaja Nizamuddin Auliya and Hazrat Baba Farid, both belonging to the 13th Century.

Thus the 13th and 14th centuries saw the emergence and growth of the Sufi movement in India. The Sufi movement as given above was a socio-religious movement. The last Sufi of the Chishtia order and the last Sufi from Delhi, Nasiruddin Chirag Dehli died in 1356. The Sufi message of *suleh-e-kul* had a great influence on both the Hindus and Muslims alike. While some historians claim the influence of Sufi on the Bhakti movement and others speak about the reversal of influence – that of the Bhakti movement on the Sufi movement, there is the established fact that compassion and sympathy for the downtrodden and the poor stressed by both religious orders appealed to people of both religions. Their message had a lasting impact in the collective psyche of the Indian masses. It can therefore be said that the Sufi Movement from the 12th to the 14th centuries and the Bhakti movement from the 15th and 16th centuries provided poetry the highest degree of devotion and are unique in extending the respective religious movements to inspire and articulate social messages.

Activity 6

What was the message of the two religious orders that had an appeal to the masses belonging to both Hinduism and Islam?

3.4 LINK BETWEEN THE *UPANISHADS* AND THE *QURAN*

To understand the link between the Sufi and the Bhakti movement, let us look at a few of the important aspects of Hinduism related to Advaita philosophy in the *Svetasvatara Upanishad*:

Na tasya pratima asti

There is no likeness of Him.

Na samdrse tisthati rupam asya, na caksusa pasyati kas canainam.

His form is not to be seen; no one sees Him with the eye.

shudhamapoapvidham

He is bodiless and pure.

In the *Quran*, the main principle is that of ‘Oneness’. According to Islam, God is singular (*tawhid*), unique (*wahid*), the one and only one (*ahad*), and is all-merciful and omnipotent. And according to the *Quran*, “No vision can grasp him, but His grasp is over all vision: He is above all comprehension, yet is acquainted with all things.”

From the above it is clear that there are common links between the *Quran* and the *Yajur Veda* where both speak of a god, formless and who cannot be seen with human eyes and He is the one and only one - unique and singular.

Activity 7

Explain the common link between *Islam and Hinduism* as evidenced in the *Quran* and the *Vedas*.

3.5 BULLEH SHAH, THE SUFI MYSTIC AND POET

Though there is no authentic record, it is an accepted surmise that Bulleh Shah was born in 1680. He was a Punjabi poet of the Sufi Muslim order, born in Bahawalpur, Punjab, which is now in Pakistan. His ancestors had migrated from Bukhara in modern Uzbekistan. His father, Shah Muhammad Darwaish, was a preacher in a village mosque and a teacher. His father later got a job in Pandoke, about 50 miles southeast of Kasur. Bulleh Shah received higher education and became a student of the prominent professors Ghulam Murtaza and Maulana Mohiyuddin. His spiritual teacher was the eminent Sufi saint, Shah Inayat Qadri.



A large measure of what is known about Bulleh Shah comes through legends, and to that extent it is subjective. He has himself contributed a brief sketch of his life through his writings. Other “facts” seem to have been passed down through oral traditions. Bulleh Shah practiced the Sufi tradition of Punjabi poetry established by poets like Shah Hussain (1538 – 1599), Sultan Bahu (1629 – 1691), and Shah Sharaf (1640 – 1724). Bulleh Shah was a contemporary of the famous Sindhī Sufi poet, Shah Abdul Latif Bhatai (1689 – 1752), the legendary Punjabi poet Waris Shah (1722 – 1798), of *Heer Ranjha* fame, and the illustrious Sindhī Sufi poet Abdul Wahad (1739 – 1829), better known by his pen-name, Sachal Sarmast (“truth seeking leader of the intoxicated ones”), and Mir Taqi Mir (1723 – 1810) of Agra. He died in 1758 at the age of 77, and his tomb is located in Kasur, Pakistan. He was a poet, **humanist** and a philosopher.

3.5.1 Bulleh Shah, an Apostle of Peace

Bulleh Shah was born at a time when the communal strife between Sikhs and Muslims was high. He incurred the wrath of Muslims when he condemned the murder of an innocent Sikh in retaliation for the murder of a few Muslims by Sikhs. Violence, Bulleh Shah said, cannot be quelled by violence; on the contrary, violence engendered violence. Similarly he counseled the Sikhs to give up their campaign of hatred against the Muslims. But for his unorthodox advocacy of peace and harmony among Hindus and Muslims, the Muslim clergy (the mullahs) decreed that Bulleh Shah should not be given burial.

He was an apostle of peace which makes him a humanist. It is important to note that even if one is a mystic, in search of God, s/he can also be a humanist, one whose life is based on reason and common humanity, one who recognizes that moral values are to be founded on human nature and experience alone and who seeks solutions to the problems of fellow human beings in the world around her/him. Bulleh Shah also hailed Guru Tegh Bahadur as a **Ghazi** (an Islamic title given to a religious Muslim warrior).

Bulleh Shah's writings represent him as a humanist, someone providing solutions to the sociological problems of the world around him even as he was constantly searching for God. His poetry highlights his mystical spiritual voyage through the four stages of Sufism: *Shariat* (exoteric path or external knowledge), *Tariqat* (esoteric path or internal knowledge), *Haqiqa* (mystical truth) and *Marifa* (mystical truth). Bulleh Shah has been able to address the complex fundamental issues of life and humanity. Thus, many people have put his kafis to music, from humble street-singers to renowned Sufi singers like the Waddali Brothers and Abida Parveen, from the synthesized techno qawwali remixes of UK-based Asian artists to the rock band Junoon. Bulleh Shah's popularity stretches uniformly across Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims, to the point that much of the written material about this Muslim thinker is from Hindu and Sikh sources. Modern renditions can be listened to in the songs *Chhayya Chayya* and *Thayya Thayya*.

Activity 8

Why is Bulleh Shah considered to be a humanist?

3.6 KAFI, A FORM OF SUFI POETRY

As a poet, Bulleh Shah wrote Kafis. Let us first understand what we mean by Kafi.

Kafi is a classical form of Sufi poetry in the Punjabi and Sindhi languages which flourished from the 14th to the 16th C. This period is known as the golden age of Punjabi Sufi poetry. The verse form which Bulleh Shah primarily employed is a style of Punjabi, Sindhi and Siraiki poetry used not only by the Sufis of Sindh and Punjab, but also by Sikh gurus. The main theme of Kafi is the dialogue between the Soul and the Oversoul - the created and the Creator. This is symbolized by the dialogue between the disciple and his master (*murid and Murshid*), between the lover and his beloved. The latter translates into heroic and romantic tales that stand as a metaphor for mystical truths, and spiritual longing.

The *Kafi* is a poem in four stanzas - a musical composition with a rhyme scheme and a refrain which is meant to be sung. Some say that the word Kafi has come from the Sanskrit word *kav* (poetry) and *kama* (sensuality). But this does not deny the possibility of its origin from the Arabic words *kamil* (perfection) and *kafa* (grouping). Some believe that the word Kafi is derived from the Arabic *Kafa* which means a group. The word *kafi* is also identified by many through a raga in Indian classical music after which a *thaat* (the head of many ragas) is named.

3.6.1 The Kafi Tradition

Punjab had its own literary tradition which was started by Fariduddin Ganjshakar(1173-1266). He was the first Punjabi Sufi poet whose poetry was compiled after his death in the *Adi Granth*. Bulleh Shah practiced the Sufi tradition of Punjabi poetry established by poets like Shah Hussain (1538 – 1599), Sultan Bahu (1629 – 1691), and Shah Sharaf (1640 – 1724). Punjabi poetry was used both by Sufis of Sindh and Punjab as well as by Sikh gurus. In contrast to Persian poets who had preferred the *ghazal* for poetic expression, Punjabi Sufi poets tended to compose in the *Kafi*.

Sufi poetry continued even after the 17th Century with well known poets like Waris Shah (known for his great work *Heer Ranjha*; Sachal Sarmast, (1739-1829) a Sindhi Sufi poet who wrote musical *Kalam*, discussions and debates relating to Islamic theology as well as Kafis; Mian Muhammad Baksh, a Kashmiri Sufi poet (1830-1907), known for his *Sohni Mahival*, and the multi lingual Khawaja Ghulam Farid (1645-1901), known for his lyrics of ecstasy.

3.7 ‘KAFI 7’ BY BULLEH SHAH

Bulleya Ki Jaana Main Kaun

Bulleya to me, I am not known

Say Bulla, I know not who I am

I am neither a believer going to a mosque

Nor am I given to non-believer’s ways

I am neither clean nor unclean

Neither *a Moses* nor a *Pharaoh*

I know not who I am

Neither among the sinners nor the saints

I am neither happy nor unhappy

I belong neither to water nor to the earth

I am neither fire nor air

I know not who I am

Neither I know the secrets of religion

Nor am I born of **Adam and Eve**

I have given myself no name

I know not who I am

I belong neither to those who squat,

Nor those who are given to wandering

I know not who I am

I was in the beginning, I would be there in the end

Who could be wiser than me?

None else is *primed* of this secret

(Though) I know not who I am

(Translated by K.S.Duggal)

3.8 ANALYSIS OF THE POEM

The poem has a refrain “*I know not who I am.*” and seeks to unravel this riddle. The riddle is one of the eternal and unsolved questions common to us all, relating to one’s identity. Can any one of us give an answer to the question “Who am I?”

The poet has the name Bulleh Shah, but he wants to know, who is Bulleh Shah? The self that answers the question as to who Bulleh Shah is, relates only to the externalities. The Self that is deep within all of us is not known to us, as no one born in this world knows where s/he came from, why they have been born, what

is the purpose of their coming into the world and where they will go after death. It is a mystery to which none of our externalities - attributes, character, relationship with others, daily existence comprising words and actions - provide the crucial answer to the questions raised above whose purpose is to identify the inner, deeper or the true Self.

Bulleh Shah says the name he subscribes to is the name given to him by his parents but they are not and cannot be his true parents as they also do not know who they are and where they had come from. But the truth is we all come from God, who is our true parent.

The answer to the riddle 'who am I' cannot be derived from our external attributes such as being a believer or a non believer, a sinner or a pious person, a slave driver like Pharaoh or a liberator like Moses...

The only answer to the riddle "Who am I" is: "I know I am 'i' but do not know who the 'I' is, as the 'I', the inner Self, permeates and overarches the external self 'i' (Kindly note the distinction between "I" and "i")

The poet then says "I know not who I am ... Nor am I born of Adam and Eve"
All of us know only our earthly parents - but not God, our original ancestor, who had created Adam and Eve and is, in that sense, the progenitor. The logical reasoning for his ignorance about his identity is through yet another denial:

I belong neither to water nor to the earth
I am neither fire nor air

As human beings, we are aware of the five prime elements of Nature (*pancha bootham*) - air, water, earth, fire and space (vayu, jal, bhu, agni and akash), but we go far beyond these five perceivable elements. In this context, it would be interesting to compare these lines with lines from the 19th C poet Wordsworth who comes nearly six centuries later:

The Soul that rises with us, our life's Star,
Hath had elsewhere its setting...
But trailing clouds of glory do we come
From God, who is our home:

Heaven lies about us in our infancy! ("Ode on Intimations of Immortality")

Bulleh Shah offers yet one more reason as to why he does not know who he is:

I belong neither to those who squat,
Nor those who are given to
wandering

Whether he is moving about, active and mobile or whether he is rooted to one place, passive and immobile, neither of the two states will give him the answer as to who he is.

The last four lines state that the True Self has neither a beginning nor an end as it is eternal.

I was in the beginning, I would be there in the end
Who could be wiser than me?
None else is primed of this secret
(Though) I know not who I am

When he has listed the reasons as to why he does not know his true identity, he asks who else can know the secret of one's birth, existence and death.

Activity 9

What does Bulleh Shah say about the 'I'?

3.9 UNITY OF BEING: MEETING OF ADVAITA AND SUFI PHILOSOPHY

This poem is a good example of the Unity of Being (*Wahat-ul-Wajud*), the concept of mystical Sufis and which, as the phrase suggests, is about **Monotheism of Existence**. *Wujud* (i.e. existence) here refers to Allah's *Wujud* - where God and his creation are not separate but one. *Wujud* is the unique Reality from which all reality derives. The external world of reality consisting of tangible and sensible objects is but a fleeting shadow of the Real (*al-Haq*), God - the eternal reality. Whatever exists is the shadow (*tajalli*) of the Real and is not independent of God. *Advaita Vedanta* and Sufism meet here and can be seen as the parallel of modern psychological theory of the **Collective Unconscious**. Advaita means 'Non-Dual' which refers to the tradition's absolute monism. Two specific passages from the *Chandogya Upanishad* provide a valuable insight into the foundation of the philosophy of *Advaita Vedanta* that parallels Sufi metaphysics:

In the beginning, this world was just Being [i.e. Brahman] – one only, without a second ... And it thought to itself 'Let me become many; let me multiply myself.

(Chandogya Upanishad 6.2.1-3)

By means of just one lump of clay, everything made of clay can be known: any modifications are merely verbal distinctions, names; the reality is just clay.

(Chandogya Upanishad 6.1.4)

The unity between the true self and universal reality is indicated by the Sanskrit language phrase *tat tvam asi* – you are that, i.e. you are that highest reality, Brahman.

The **Pantheistic monism** of *advaita* and *wahdat-al-wujud* of the Sufis are different expressions of the same view about Divinity, Man and the Universe.

The whole unity of the poem is to establish the impossibility of knowing one's true identity except for the fact that the "I" or the Soul is one with the Oversoul - the merging of human consciousness with the divine consciousness, beyond institutionalized facts of externalities.

Throughout 'Kafi 7' Bulleh Shah keeps giving examples using two poles namely "neither"/ "nor" to reason why he cannot know his identity beyond what is known to the world he is born into. This question, while it is addressed to himself,

Bulleya, is also addressed to every other human being as an extension of himself, an understanding that it is common to all...

In 'Kafi 7' Bulleh Shah uses symbols which show his depth of learning. These symbols, like Mosque, Adam and Eve, Moses, Pharaoh, purity and impurity, are taken from various religions which make this poem a secular text, beyond religions and outward symbols.

3.10 LET US SUM UP

This unit introduced you to a sample of devotional poetry of the medieval period of the Sufi tradition, composed by Bulleh Shah (Punjabi Sufi). We also discussed the Bhakti and Sufi traditions and saw how the compositions of varied poets from both traditions serve to emphasise the concept of India's plurality that has a strong thread of common thought and sentiment running through them. We could also see how the Advaita and Sufi traditions echo each other when it comes to philosophical concepts dealing with existence.

3.11 Aids to Activities

Activity 1: It mentions the word Bhakti and sets out what the word denotes.

Activity 2: Meera, Mahadevi Akka, Kabir were some of the poets. They can be accessed in the original through a variety of Indian languages.

Activity 3: It focused on relationship between devotee and the Almighty; emphasis on devotion; freedom to worship in whatever manner they chose.

Activity 4: Starting from the South of India, the movement gradually spread to all the corners of the country.

Activity 5: The two movements went beyond religion and offered a social message.

Activity 6: Compassion and sympathy for the downtrodden and the poor.

Activity 7: Both speak of a god who is formless, cannot be seen with human eyes and unique.

Activity 8: Attempts to provide solutions to sociological problems even while seeking God.

Activity 9: The True "I" goes beyond all the externalities and is a mystery.

3.12 GLOSSARY

Adam and Eve : according to the creation myth of the Abrahamic religions, Adam and Eve were the first man and woman and the ancestors of all humans

Collective Unconscious : theory of Carl Jung, who relates it to a part of the unconscious mind, shared by a society, a people, or all humankind, that is the product of ancestral experience

Ghazi : an Islamic term for a religious warrior

- Humanist** : one who has a strong concern for human welfare, values and dignity
- Monotheism of Existence** : the belief in the existence of only one god that created the world
- Moses** : a Hebrew prophet in 1300 BCE (before the Common Era or BC) who delivered his people, the Jews, from slavery under one of the Egyptian Pharaohs. He led them to the Holy Land that God had promised them. Moses led the Exodus (in the Bible, the departure of the Israelites from Egypt) of the Jews out of Egypt and across the Red Sea, after which they based themselves at Mount Sinai, where Moses received the **Ten Commandments**
- Old Testament** : the first of the two main divisions of the Christian Bible, corresponding to the Hebrew Scriptures as distinguished in Christianity from the dispensation of Jesus constituting the New Testament
- Pantheistic** : the belief that reality is identical with Divinity
- Pharaoh** : common title of the monarchs of ancient Egypt from the First Dynasty (c. 3150 BCE) until the annexation of Egypt by the Roman Empire in 30 BCE ... Moses delivered The Jews from the slavery of Pharaoh Thutmose II (1493-1479BC), the fourth ruler of the 18th dynasty of Egypt
- Primed** : be fully prepared
- Refrain** : A comment or statement that is repeated
- The Ten Commandments** : Said to be given by God and were meant to serve as principles of moral behaviour for the people. They form the foundation of the moral code and legal system of justice for Western Christian civilization. Moses founded the religious community known as Israel. “In the Judaic tradition, he is revered as the greatest prophet and teacher, and Judaism has sometimes loosely been called Mosaism, or the Mosaic faith, in Western Christendom. His influence continues to be felt in the religious life, moral concerns, and social ethics of Western civilization, and therein lies his undying significance

3.13 UNIT END QUESTIONS

- 1) What is the meaning of Bhakti in Hinduism? How is the word used in the *Bhagvad Geeta*?

- 2) What contributed to the fall of the Mughal Empire and why was Islam hostile to Hinduism?
- 3) Why is the Bhakti movement known as a socio-religious movement?
- 4) How did the Hindu and Muslim sects come together?
- 5) What is Kafi? List the elements of the Kafi style in Bulleh Shah's poem given in this unit.
- 6) Bulleh Shah is known to be an apostle of peace and a humanist. From the brief biography given above, illustrate how he is both a pacifist and a humanist.
- 7) Why does Bulleh Shah say he cannot know his identity?
- 8) Attempt a summary of the poem 'Kafi 7'
- 9) Comment on the effective use of the two words "neither" and "nor" in Bulleh Shah's poem.
- 10) How do you think Bulleh Shah is representative of the Bhakti/Sufi movements?

3.14 REFERENCES AND SUGGESTED READING

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UNIT 4 BAUL GAAN, AKKA MAHADEVI AND MEERABAI

Structure

- 4.0 Objectives
- 4.1 Introduction
- 4.2 Indian Religious Poetry
- 4.3 Rabindranath Tagore
- 4.4 Who are the Bauls?
- 4.5 'Baul Gaan' (the Song)
- 4.6 Analysis of 'Baul Gaan'
- 4.7 Akka Mahadevi
- 4.8 The Poem 'Vacana' by Akka Mahadevi
- 4.9 Interpretation of the poem
- 4.10 Meerabai
- 4.11 The poem 'Mere to Giridhara Gopal'
- 4.12 Interpretation of the poem
- 4.13 Let Us Sum Up
- 4.14 Aids to Activities
- 4.15 Questions
- 4.16 References and Suggested Reading

4.0 OBJECTIVES

When you finish studying this Unit, you will

- have learnt about the Indian religious poetry movement
- appreciate the contribution of Baul singers to the Indian Bhakti Movement
- understand the folk song, 'Baul Gaan' translated by Rabindranath Tagore
- learn about Akka MahaDevi, the Kannada saint poet and understand her poem 'Vacana'
- learn about Meerabai and understand her last Bhajan,

Mere tho giridhar gopal doosro na koi

मेरे तो गिरिधर गोपाल दूसरो न कोई।

Words in **bold** are explained in the **Glossary**

4.1 INTRODUCTION

In this Unit, we give you three samples of devotional songs from medieval Indian poetry - one from Bengal, another from Karnataka and the third from Rajasthan. The poems are 'Baul Gaan' from Bengali folk poetry, 'Vacana' by Akka Mahadevi and a 'Bhajan' by Meerabai.

This is a continuation of Unit 3 where you were introduced to the *Bhakti* and Sufi movements in medieval India. You will now read about the compositions of the ecstasy of these three Indian Bhakti singers in their quest for merger with the Lord.

4.2 INDIAN RELIGIOUS POETRY

We have seen in the previous Unit (Unit 3) how the Bhakti movement was a pan India movement starting from the 8th C in South India and spreading to the North, East and West between the thirteenth and seventeenth centuries. We have also seen how devotional poetry brought the Bhakti movement and the Sufi movements close to each other and how Sufi poetry continued well beyond the medieval period into modern times.

The medieval period of religious poetry was both devotional and reformatory in that it lifted the control of religion by the priestly class and made it accessible to all and did away with the hypocrisy and irrational rituals that were practiced in the name of religion. In India, religious poetry sung by individual poets was a spontaneous rendering of the poet's personal love for the deity and every poem focused on the individual's inner experience of devotion and ecstasy in the presence of the Lord. The poems are expressions of complete love and total surrender unto the Supreme Lord.

Bhakti poets of different regions wrote in their respective languages and thus Indian religious poetry contributed to the development of poetry in Indian languages. India enjoys a unique multi lingual status whereby languages in different regions show a wholesome development that is reflected in the rich Indian literature that has come down to us from very ancient times. In this Unit we will give you samples of a Bengali poem, a Kannada poem and a Tamil poem. This will help you understand the growth of literature in Indian languages and in particular, the compositions of saint-poets of the Bhakti movement. These songs were originally preserved in the oral tradition and later recorded for posterity as written documents.

Activity 1

What do you think are the main characteristics of Indian religious poetry?

The history of devotional poetry in India dates back from the ancient texts of Rig Vedic hymns in 1200-900 BCE to songs and slokas (or prayers) that are composed even today. It is to the credit of the Bhakti movement that it could produce the largest number of devotional hymns and songs in praise of the Lord and which were the spontaneous outpourings of the devotees' inner experiences and their ecstatic journey towards their final merger with the Lord. The stotras (or prayers) were addressed mainly to Siva, Vishnu, Krishna and Devi (the Goddess) and in our selection of three poets, we have a devotee of Siva, another of Krishna and the third of the Supreme Lord. We have chosen two female poets and a group of singers as samples of Indian religious poetry.

In South India, in the early medieval period between the 6th and the 8th C, there were sixty three *Saiva* poets called *Nayanars* (teachers of Siva) and twelve *Vaishnava* poets known as *Alvars* (those immersed in God) who through their hymns inspired faith in the masses and influenced the Bhakti movement. It is to

be noted that most of these poets did not belong to the Brahminical class. Yet another group of the South Indian *bhakti* movement was that of the *Siddhas*. In Tamil, 'siddha' means 'great thinker or wise man' and in Sanskrit, it means 'a perfected man' – someone who has surrendered and is completely receptive to God. *Siddha* poetry like the mainstream *Bhakti* poetry was also critical of Brahminical rituals and practices and the pseudo religiosity that accompanied them. Between the 10th and the 12th C, we have in Karnataka *Virasaiva* poets who dedicated their songs to Lord Siva. Among them, the four greatest and pioneering poets were Basavanna, Devara Dasimayya, Akka Mahadevi, and Allama Prabhu. They composed *vacanas*, short free-verse utterances expressing intense personal experience and sometimes trenchant criticism of what the poets regarded as superstition and hypocrisy. We have analysed a 'vacana' by Akka Mahadevi in this selection.

Activity 2

What are the main streams of *Bhakti* poetry of South India? What are the special features of these forms of poetry?

Apart from South Indian *bhakti* poets, there were many contributors to *bhakti* poetry from the rest of India. Among them were (i) Lal Ded (Kashmiri poet of the fourteenth century) who was a woman devotee of Shiva (ii) Guru Arjun with his compilation of *Adi Granth* (1604); its second edition was brought out by Guru Govind Singh in 1708 with additional 115 hymns of his father, Guru Tegh Bahadur (iii) the Sufi poets who wrote in Punjabi, Sindhi and Kashmiri, and (iv) the Hindi poets, Tulsidas, Surdas, Kabir, and Meerabai. Also we have Gurû Nânak (1469–1539), who founded Sikhism and composed poems revering the formless God and criticizing superstitious practices. Mention should also be made of the poetry of the North Indian *yogins* called *Nath Panthis*, who belong to the same broad tradition as the Tamil *siddhas*. The most significant collection of the *Nath Panthis* is attributed to Gorakhnath (eleventh century?), its semi-legendary founder whose teachings pervaded North Indian religious thought in the medieval period.

We have in this Unit discussed a *Bhajan* of Meerabai, a Rajput princess who became a wandering saint totally devoted to Krishna whom she regarded as her husband. Although she is believed to have spent the later part of her life in Dwarka, Gujarat, and a considerable body of poetry ascribed to her exists in Gujarati, she is more closely linked to her native Rajasthan and to its regional form of Hindi.

The story of Bengali *bhakti* poetry begins with a Sanskrit poet, Jayadeva, and his master piece *Gita Govinda* that sings the drama of love between Krishna and Radha. Then came Chaitanya Mahaprabhu (1486-1533) who developed the Bengali *Kirtan*. The *Bauls*, unique to Bengal, were iconoclastic wanderers who partook of the devotional poetry of both Hindu and Sufi mysticism and their worship was exclusively through singing.

Two great Sanskrit poets appear in the second century CE. Asvaghosa is most famous for the *Buddhacarita*, a biography of the Buddha in the form of a *mahâkâvyâ* (lyric narrative). His contemporary, Matrceta, wrote beautiful Sanskrit hymns to the Buddha. The seventh-century Chinese pilgrim Yi Jing reported, "Throughout India everyone who becomes a monk is taught Matrceta's two hymns as soon as he can recite the ... precepts." In the 7th century, Santideva composed

many stotras in praise of the Buddha and the Bodhisattvas (those with a high degree of enlightenment) and expressed his dedication to the Buddhist path. There also exists Jain poetry in Hindi and Gujarati, the most famous being the *Bhaktâmara Stotra* of Manatunga, whose dates have been estimated to be as early as the third and as late as the ninth century. Several Jain authors composed both philosophical works and devotional poems. A large number of Jain poems are known for their ornate verses. Religious poetry was prevalent in other parts of the country as well.

4.3 RABINDRANATH TAGORE

Tagore, also known as “the greatest of the Bauls of Bengal” is also the discoverer of the Baul songs. Tagore was greatly influenced by the spiritual tenor of the Baul poems and was among the most prominent writers to bring the Bauls to the notice of the west. The Baul song tradition reached its peak in the 19thC, thanks to the English translations by Rabindranath Tagore. It was through his efforts that the Baul songs were made accessible to the West and the non Bengalis in India.



We give below the Nobel citation when Tagore was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature.

The extract is from *Nobel Lectures, Literature 1901-1967*, Editor Horst Frenz, Elsevier Publishing Company, Amsterdam, 1969. This autobiography/biography was written at the time of the award and first published in the book series *Les Prix Nobel*. It was later edited and republished in *Nobel Lectures*.

“Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) was the youngest son of Debendranath Tagore, a leader of the Brahmo Samaj, which was a new religious sect in nineteenth-century Bengal and which attempted a revival of the ultimate monistic basis of Hinduism as laid down in the *Upanishads*. He was educated at home; and although at seventeen he was sent to England for formal schooling, he did not finish his studies there. In his mature years, in addition to his many-sided literary activities, he managed the family estates, a project which brought him into close touch with common humanity and increased his interest in social reforms. He also started an experimental school at Shantiniketan where he tried his Upanishadic ideals of education. From time to time he participated in the Indian nationalist movement, though in his own non-sentimental and visionary way; and Gandhi, the political father of modern India, was his devoted friend. Tagore was knighted by the ruling British Government in 1915, but within a few years he resigned the honour as a protest against British policies in India.

Tagore had early success as a writer in his native Bengal. With his translations of some of his poems he became rapidly known in the West. In fact his fame attained a luminous height, taking him across continents on lecture tours and tours of friendship. For the world he became the voice of India’s spiritual heritage; and for India, especially for Bengal, he became a great living institution.

Although Tagore wrote successfully in all literary genres, he was first of all a poet. Among his fifty and odd volumes of poetry are *Manasi* (1890) [The Ideal One], *Sonar Tari* (1894) [*The Golden Boat*], *Gitanjali* (1910) [*Song Offerings*], *Gitimalya* (1914) [*Wreath of Songs*], and *Balaka* (1916) [*The Flight of Cranes*].

The English renderings of his poetry, which include *The Gardener* (1913), *Fruit-Gathering* (1916), and *The Fugitive* (1921), do not generally correspond to particular volumes in the original Bengali; and in spite of its title, *Gitanjali: Song Offerings* (1912), the most acclaimed of them, contains poems from other works besides its namesake. Tagore's major plays are *Raja* (1910) [*The King of the Dark Chamber*], *Dakghar* (1912) [*The Post Office*], *Achalayatan* (1912) [*The Immovable*], *Muktadhara* (1922) [*The Waterfall*], and *Raktakaravi* (1926) [*Red Oleanders*]. He is the author of several volumes of short stories and a number of novels, among them *Gora* (1910), *Ghare-Baire* (1916) [*The Home and the World*], and *Yogayog* (1929) [*Crosscurrents*]. Besides these, he wrote musical dramas, dance dramas, essays of all types, travel diaries, and two autobiographies, one in his middle years and the other shortly before his death in 1941. Tagore also left numerous drawings and paintings, and songs for which he wrote the music himself."

Activity 3

What was Tagore's singular contribution to Baul songs?

4.4 WHO ARE THE BAULS?



Bauls are known as wandering minstrels (the term usually applied to medieval singers). They hail from the eastern part of India, particularly from Bengal, Assam and Tripura. Their songs are known for their religious content - love and devotion to God - and are sung, following a musical tradition.

The Baul culture is a mix of the devotional bhakti streams that we see in both the Islamic and Hindu cultures of the medieval period, and they have remained a strong presence in Bengal till today. The Baul tradition was mainly an oral tradition, inspired by the well known 12thC poet Jaydeva, the composer of *Gita*

Govind. It continued from the 14th to the 16th C when the *Vaishnava Bhakti* movement was at its peak, declaring the unity of the heavenly and earthly loves.

Bengal has two large rivers flowing through the state - the Ganga and the Brahmaputra. The Baul used the river and the boat as metaphors. The Baul Gaan (the Baul song) uses a lot of metaphors, some of which are universal such as “life is like a river.” The theme of the songs is about the inner quest to be a part of the Divinity whence we have come and negates all formal visits to the temples and mosques in search of God. This is a common phenomenon present in the Sufi and Bhakti traditions.

Activity 4

What is the similarity between the Sufi tradition and the Baul songs?

4.5 ‘BAUL GAAN’ (THE SONG)

I am the boat, you are the sea, and also the boatman.

Though you never make the shore, though you let me sink, why should I be foolish and afraid?

Is reaching the shore a greater prize than losing myself with you?

If you are only the haven, as they say, then what is the sea?

Let it surge and toss me on its waves, I shall be content.

I live in you whatever and however you appear. Save me or kill me as you wish, only never leave me in other hands.

(Anonymous, translated by Rabindranath Tagore)

4.6 ANALYSIS OF ‘BAUL GAAN’

The Opening line “I am the boat, you are the sea, and also the boatman ” affirms the power of the sea and of the boatman steering the boat across the seas. The boat has no power of its own to move. It is propelled by the boatman who rows it through the waters. It is often said that neither the flute nor the harmonium knows how to make music; it is the player who plays the musical instruments to create the desired music. So is the boat passive and rooted to its anchored position till the boatman paddles it through the waters. The sea is often used as a metaphor for the flow of life. In one single line, the song distils the meaning of how the boatman (God) steers us through life as we neither have the power nor the skill to sail through life without His grace.

The next line “Though you never make the shore, though you let me sink, why should I be foolish and afraid?” is a rhetorical question which has an in built answer that we need not be foolish or afraid as we are steered through by the boatman. Implied in this line is that life is always in the forward movement and it never goes back to the past. Once the boat leaves the shore it does not return even if it sinks in the sea. So are we forever on the move from birth to death, but in our firm belief that He, (the boatman) guides us (the boat) through life, we need not be afraid even if we do not return to the shore. The word ‘sink’ is not to be misread as something calamitous, sinking in the sea is merging with Him, as

the next line reads: “Is reaching the shore a greater prize than losing myself with you?” The phrase losing myself with you means merging with the Lord. The rhetorical question has the answer that reverting nostalgically to the life left behind is not as worthy of seeking as the becoming one with the Source one comes from.

“If you are only the haven, as they say, then what is the sea?”

“haven “ is a place of shelter, safety. By plumbing the depths of the sea, one experiences and explores the haven, the safe shelter provided by God

Let it surge and toss me on its waves, I shall be content.

I live in you whatever and however you appear.

Save me or kill me as you

wish, only never leave me in other hands.

The metaphor used here is that of the waves and the sea. The waves are a part of the ocean and are distinct from the ocean. But after their ebb and fall, they become one with the ocean. Hence the singer says s/he lives in the Ocean of Grace - the Lord and will be content so long as the Lord abides by him/her.

4.7 AKKA MAHADEVI

Akka Mahadevi, a saint poet who wrote in Kannada belonged to the second half of the 12thC. Akka in Kannada means elder sister. Akka Mahadevi was not only a poet, but also a mystic and a social activist. She was a contemporary of Basavanna, the founder of the sect of *Veersaivism*. *Veerasaivists* are today addressed as *Lingayats*. *Veerasaivism* has been a reformatory socio-religious movement. From her childhood she was initiated into the worship of Shiva and remained a devoted worshipper all her life. The form of Shiva she worshipped was known as *Chennamallikarjuna*, which translates as “The Beautiful Lord, White as Jasmine.” Much of Akka Mahadevi’s poetry refers to her vivid descriptions of her beautiful Lord. And indeed she always signed her poems, O Lord White as Jasmine.” This is an important feature of poems in Indian languages where the poet’s signature is built within the poem. This is seen in the *pad*, a form used by saint poets, which is the most influential medium for the expression of devotion. The poet’s name is registered within the poem, somewhere in the last one or two lines.



Though we have contradictory reports about her marriage to a local Jain King, her spiritual acceptance of Shiva as her Lord made her renounce her worldly life. She became a wandering mendicant and her devotion to Lord Shiva was without the formal outer rituals associated with Shiva worship (for that matter with the worship of any God) Her only desire was to merge with her *Chennamallikarjuna* and in her later years she retreated to a cave where she gave up her earthly life and merged with her Lord. In her intense devotion to Lord Shiva and single minded quest of Him she spurned the riches and comforts of a palace, cut asunder domestic bonds, and set out as a wandering devotee meeting with and overcoming many hardships on her journey to this final goal. In addition, she had the gift of imaginative expression. A few of the outpourings

of her experience are preserved for posterity in the shape of *Vacanas* “sayings” in rhythmic Kannada prose. Her *vacanas* are characterized by intense feeling and deep insight.

As stated above, Akka Mahadevi wrote in the *vacana* form, which can be briefly described as a kind of free verse or prose poem with a rhythmic structure specially evident in the sentence patterns. These *vacanas* are a good example of her total devotion to Lord Shiva, unmediated by customs, traditions and rituals. In her life and in her love for the Lord, we see a clear differentiation between *dharma* and *bhakti*, where *dharma* emphasizes adherence to codified rituals while *bhakti* focuses on one’s inner and fervent devotion to God, keeping aside the conventional worship in practice in society. It is in this defiance of conventions and rituals that Akka Mahadevi reveals her modernity. It is said she had thrown away her clothes and covered her body only with her long tresses, in a gesture of ultimate social defiance against the male gaze. In the words of A.K.Ramanujan in his book *Speaking of Siva* “The intense poems of personal devotion to a single deity also question traditional belief systems, customs, superstitions, image worship and even moral strictures, in verse that speaks to all men and women regardless of class and caste... Her search is recorded in her *vacanas* as a search for her love, following all the phases of human love as set forth by the conventions of Indian, especially Sanskrit, poetry. The three chief forms of love - love forbidden, love in separation and love in union are all expressed in her poems, often one attitude informing and complicating another in the same poem. She remains a symbol of women’s rights and dignity.”

Activity 5

Why do you think Akka Mahadevi gave up wearing clothing?

4.8 THE POEM ‘VACANA’ - BY AKKA MAHADEVI

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.
I love the Beautiful One
with no bond nor fear
no clan no land
no landmarks
for his beauty.
So my lord, white as jasmine, is my
husband.
Take these husbands who die, decay,
and feed them to your kitchen fires

4.9 INTERPRETATION OF THE POEM

This is a simple poem, with no complicated meaning to reach for. It is a penetrating description of Siva, a deity, handsome, immortal and one who has neither birth nor death. The poet says her love is unmediated - without the intervention of any custom, tradition or convention which are laden with rituals and pseudo religious formalities. She loves him for His beauty. Beauty is not to be interpreted as solely a physical attribute because no one has seen Siva except as He appears in one's imagination, inspired by passion and devotion. She compares Him to white jasmine. The jasmine flower is usually associated with love. Jasmine also symbolizes beauty and sensuality. In some cultures, *it* represents appreciation and good luck. When used in religious ceremonies, jasmine represents purity and the meanings vary depending on the culture and setting.

Here the poet associates jasmine with white colour. White jasmine flowers are mostly used in art and literature as a symbol of purity and innocence. White jasmine flowers are often used in wedding ceremonies where these symbolic meanings are perfect for the occasion. White jasmine is a perfect gift for a person whom one respects and has a high regard for. Hence white jasmine is for Akka Mahadevi, none other than Siva.

The last three lines strike a jarring note though they reflect a realistic view of life. The poet brings in a contrast between the Immortal Lord Siva whom she regards as her husband and mortal humans who die and decay and are consigned to fires. Fire is known as "Agni", the Vedic God of Hinduism. Agni is a symbol of piety and purity. Agni is an expression of two kinds of energy i.e. light and heat and thus is designated as the symbol of life and activity. The mortal beings consumed by fires is a reference to their being transformed from the gross to the subtle, destroying their ignorance and delusions.

"Agni is symbolism for psychological and physiological aspects of life", states *Maha Purana* section LXVII.202–203. There are three kinds of Agni inside every human being, according to this text - the *krodha-agni* or "fire of anger", the *kama-agni* or "fire of passion and desire", and the *udara-agni* or "fire of digestion". These respectively need introspective and voluntary offerings of forgiveness, detachment and fasting, if one desires spiritual freedom and liberation.

"Feed them to the kitchen fires" is thus a reference to purifying the mortal beings through fire. Agni has two forms –the *Jatavada*, associated with Knowledge and Brahman and *Kravyada*, the fire that cremates the physical body and the funeral fire that recycles it to be reborn - a process that continues till such time all the three kinds of fire within oneself - fire of anger, fire of passion and desire and fire of digestion are quelled and the spirit is purified.

Activity 6

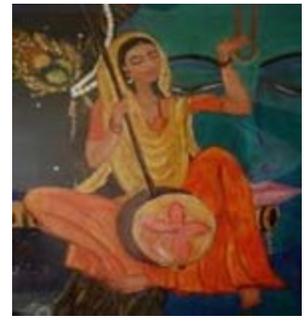
What, according to Akka Mahadevi, is the difference between Siva and mortal husbands?

4.10 MEERA BAI

Meera Bai is a household name in India. There are very few who have not heard Meera Bai's bhajans, depicting her love for Lord Krishna, her ecstasy in reaching

her lord's (Krishna) feet and her final merger with the Lord.

She was one among the great saint poets of the Bhakti movement, born in 1498 and who gave up her earthly life when she merged with her Lord in 1546 at an early age of 48. She was born as Princess of Mewar but she had a lifelong engagement with Lord Krishna, whom she addresses as Giridhar Gopal and whom she regarded as her husband. In fact, her parents had initiated her into Krishna worship through a simple marriage ceremony with a Krishna statue when she was a child. As she grew up and composed songs in praise of Lord Krishna, in song after song, she described herself as Krishna's 'daasi', ('devotee', though the literal translation is 'maid' or 'servant'). Her marriage to a prince at a very early age, his death due to wounds sustained in a battle, her refusal to be a part of the royal household and her moving out of the royal palace, first to Brindavan and later to Dwaraka, where at the end she miraculously disappeared (seen as her merger with the Lord) sum up her life story. She composed a large number of songs dedicated to Lord Krishna, though scholars are divided as to how many were her own compositions. The significant fact is that her songs were the spontaneous outpourings of her devotion - 'bhakti'. Some bhajans of Meerabai have been rendered into English by Robert Bly and Jane Hirshfield as *Meerabai: Ecstatic Poems*.



Meerabai is truly an embodiment of divine love. From her early years she had renounced all the luxuries of the royal palace and dedicated herself to the worship of Krishna. She was constantly in dialogue with Krishna. She hailed Krishna as her Beloved. Her songs were from her heart and were a spontaneous expressions of her ecstatic experiences in her contemplation of Krishna. She ate and drank, she slept and woke up with Krishna on her lips. She was indeed one of the foremost embodiments of Premabhakti (divine love) and an inspired poetess that ever walked on earth.

One of her celebrated songs is "Paayoji maine Ram Ratan dhan paayo" (पायो जी मैने राम रतन धन पायो।) (today I got the most precious wealth of Lord Rama's name. The poem is a testament to Meerabai's devotion to the Lord and her renunciation of all earthly material wealth.

Activity 7

What was it that sparked Meerabai's devotion to Lord Krishna?

4.11 THE POEM 'MERE TO GIRIDHARA GOPAL'

We give you the last Bhajan of Meerabai before she merged with Lord Krishna at the Krishna Temple in Dwaraka. This is a famous and popular Bhajan and celebrates the ultimate merger of Meerabai with Lord Krishna. To make it easy for you and to enjoy it fully, we give you both the Hindi version and the English translation of her last bhajan:

Mere to giridhar gopal doosro na koi (मेरे तो गिरिधर गोपाल दूसरो न कोई।)

There is none other than Giridhar Gopal for me

Jaake sar mor mukut mero pati soi जाके सिर मोर मुकुट मेरो पति सोई ।

He who wears the peacock feather on his turban, is my husband

taat maat brat bandhu aapno na koi तात मात भ्रात बंधु आपनो न कोई ।

All other relationships like father, mother, brother, friends – none exist for me
(except my husband, Giridhar Gopal)

chaandi lai kul ki kaani kaha karilai koi छाँडि लई कुल की कानि कहा करि है कोई ।

I have stepped across the line of my dynasty but who can do anything about it

Santan dhing baithi bhaiti lok laaj khoi संतन ढिंग बैठि लोक लाज खोई ।

I have lost dignity in the eyes of the people by being in the company of saints,
the wise men who sit in bliss lost to all worldly ways

Chunari ke kini took audh linhi loi चुनरी के किये टूक ओढ़ लीन्ही लोई ।

I have torn my colourful sari into pieces and have draped myself with the ochre
coloured one

Moti moonge uttar banmala poi मोती मूँगे उत्तर बनमाला पोई ।।

Having flung away the pearls and corals, I wear a garland of wild flowers

Asuvan jal seenchi seenchi prem beli boi अँसुवन जल सींचिसींचि प्रेम बेलि बोई ।

The waters of my tears have sown a creeper of love

Ab tho bel pheli gayi aanand phal hoi अब तो बेल फ़ैल गई आणँद फल होई ।

Now that creeper has borne the fruit of bliss

dood ki mathaniya bade prem se biloi दूध की मथनियाँ बड़े प्रेम से बिलोई ।

I have churned the curd with great love

maakhan jab khadiliyo chaach piye koi माखन जब काढ़िलियो छाछ पिये कोई ।

You get the butter and someone else gets to drink the buttermilk

Bhakt dekh raaji hui jagat dekhi roi भगत देख राजी हुई जगत देखिरोई ।

The devotee sees this and is joyful while the world is upset

Daasi meera laal giridhar taro ab mohi दासी "मीरा" लाल गिरिधर तारो अब मोही ।।

Your servant, Meera, oh beloved Giridhar, you are MINE, now!!!

4.12 INTERPRETATION OF THE POEM

This is a simple poem that ends with the affirmation that the merger of the devotee (daasi meera) with her Giridhar Gopala (Lord Krishna) is through and over. The poem reveals not only Meerabai's open proclamation that Giridhar Gopala is her husband, it also reveals her defiance of the world which refuses to acknowledge her acceptance of the heavenly Lord as her husband. She has no use for human relationships as she seeks her one and only bonding with the divine lord. She has renounced colourful saris and pearls and coral necklaces in exchange for Krishna's garland of wild flowers. For her, the wreath of love she has woven for Lord Krishna with her tears of happiness is more precious than all worldly goods.

Krishna is always shown as a great lover of butter. Meerabai says she has churned the curd with great love to separate butter from it. With love she offers it to her lord while other human beings will have to be content with the buttermilk that remains after the butter is removed.

According to Meera legend, on Krishna's birthday, (Janmashtami) at the temple of Krishna in Dwarka, she sang 'Oh, Giridhari, are you calling me, I am coming'. To the awe and astonishment of everyone in the temple who were watching, there was a light which enveloped her and the doors leading to the sanctum sanctorum closed on their own. When the doors opened again, Meera's saree was seen enveloping Lord Krishna's idol and the people assembled could hear her voice to the flute accompaniment of Lord Krishna. Meera thus merged with Krishna in Dwaraka.

Activity 8

What is the significance of Meerabai giving up her jewels and colourful clothes?

4.13 LET US SUM UP

This unit has three sections on three poems. We learnt about Baul singers and the contribution of Rabindranath Tagore's translations which brought this tradition out into the public eye. We also read a baul song and looked at how it could be interpreted in the Bhakti tradition. We went on to read about Akka Mahadevi, a saint-poet of the Bhakti period and read and analysed a Vacana, a Kannada literary genre that reads like a prose poem, suffused with metaphors. At the end of the unit, we spoke about the life of Meera Bai and attempted to understand and experience the ecstasy of her last Bhajan.

4.14 AID TO ACTIVITIES

- Activity 1:** Devotional, reformatory and multilingual
- Activity 2.** Saivite by Nayanmars, Vaishnavite by Alvars and Siddha-intense personal ecstasy and criticism of superstitions and hypocrisy that had become the practice among people in place of true religious worship
- Activity 3:** Making baul songs popular to the West and to the non Bengalis in India through his translations
- Activity 4:** To fulfill the inner quest to merge with the Divinity
- Activity 5 :** As a symbolic surrender of worldly life
- Activity 6:** Siva is neither born nor does He die whereas mortal husbands die and decay
- Activity 7:** Her parents' gifting her with a small statue when she was a child and who they referred to as her husband
- Activity 8:** Her act signifies her total surrender to her Lord and a turning away from material pleasures

4.15 QUESTIONS

- 1) Write a brief note on Indian religious poetry.
- 2) Identify and explain the metaphors used in the song 'Baul Gaan'.
- 3) Attempt a summary of the poem 'Baul Gaan'.
- 4) Illustrate this poem as a meeting of the Bhakti and Sufi traditions.
- 5) Why did Akka Mahadevi renounce her worldly life?
- 6) Explain why the poet uses the phrase "the white Jasmine" for her husband, Lord Siva.
- 7) What is the symbolic meaning of 'fire' used in the last line?
- 8) Trace the strands of devotion in the three poems that you read in this unit.

4.16 REFERENCES AND SUGGESTED READING

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