

**Historiographical inversion
of the Indian medieval literary era of devotion (*bhakti*),
complementariness of the opposites *loka*
(folk) and *Shastra* (classical), *bhakti*
and subversion of the boundaries of hierarchies**

Alexander Dow in ‘The History of Hindustan’ (1770) asserted that India had an abundance of history (as the past) but little history (as the narrative of the past). (1) What he couldn’t understand was that these ancient texts were a combination of different kinds of time and they didn’t know how exactly to use and read these texts. Also, there was in India another body of literature which they completely ignored i.e. the oral literature with malleability as its main characteristic.

The Indian narrator of the oral culture describes events for exteriorisation of the worldly process, and selects a vantage point in the time past or the time present and move to the time future which enables him to frequently change his axis in time as well as in space. This mobility gives him a holistic vision; time turns circular for him,

and he talks with his total existence which may be described as orchestration of all the senses.

On the contrary, written culture is based on a cause and effect phenomenon, has a linear development, and deals primarily with visual symbols and fixity is its main characteristic but oral culture does not believe in fixity. Till we reach the modern period, oral word more than the written word i.e. manuscripts (now, books) was used for transmission of knowledge and communication of the message of the sacred or mundane through poetry.

Both oral and written become the basis to serve as instruments of communication and dialogue between different levels of society and across regions and it is often difficult to isolate elements as belonging to the one or the other. (2) A.K. Ramanujan made it clear that it would be fallacious to assume a notion of linear development between the oral and the written or folk and classical. It is more profitable to imagine a history of texts that is made up of written and oral forms contained within cycles of transmission that move up and down through time resulting in manifold possible recompositions within a 'simultaneous order' of texts. (3)

Alexander Dow could not understand it. He could not realize that in the Indian context, the *Loka* and *Shastra* (folk/oral and classical/elite) contrast is contrary to the western contrast between Great and Little Tradition. India does not believe that non-literate cultures are ‘knowledge blanks’ which need to be filled in with the modern knowledge of different discipline and dominant cultures. In reality traditional Indian mind thinks that *Loka* or *Desi* (of the land) and *Shastra* or *Margi* (classical order or systematized knowledge) contrast represents two different expressions of the same tradition and not of different traditions. (4) These folk literary approaches are not liquidated or co-opted by core literary tradition but assimilated as alternative models of human expressions or as parts of the whole. In Indian context oral, tribal or folk lore are neither the residue of the past, nor the behaviour of the uncivilized but it is the continuity of a rich culture and also a process of making the present more life worthy.

Kapila Vatsyayan by taking the cue from a *sloka* (couplet) of the Upanishads rounded up the issue by stating that the oral and the written are two birds on the same branch: if the oral is sacred, so also is the written word. (5)

This confused the British historians in their periodization of Indian history. However, they, according to their own understanding of periodization of history loosely divided Indian history into different periods, ancient, medieval and modern or the British period. Now the problem with this sort of periodization was that they described the ancient period as a golden period in Indian history, and the medieval period as the Dark Age. It is not difficult to see why they did this --- the British wanted to represent themselves as the saviours of India, that they were the ones who rescued India and brought to it the benefits of Western civilization. When one goes through the content of the second Anniversary Discourse in 1794 (6) to the Asiatic Society of Bengal where Sir William Jones, in search of the history of India, made a comment that he would go to remote antiquity but restrict his researches downwards only up to 11th Century because every thing is dark in the pre British India, one realizes that Edward Said's attempt to view Western Literary approaches to the East in terms of political discourse cannot be ignored completely. (7) Jones' statement has two hidden meanings:

i) That pre-British medieval India had no history. It was the dark period of India and with the advent of British the darkness faded;

ii) In the process Jones tried to obliterate a part of the history of India, medieval *bhakti* (devotional) period, which was, in fact, the golden period of Indian literature and as a result created historiographical inversions by wiping out a portion from its history to suit his hidden agenda (8) to ensconce that the pre-British India had no history. It was the dark period of India of primitive religious beliefs and with the advent of British the darkness could be wiped out.

Sharing the theory of savageology, the Indologists attempted to wash out India's cultural memory by popularizing the so called notion that 'westernization is modernization'. In the process tried to eliminate India's past as well as its present.

This view encouraged a debate in India between the advocates of 'tradition' (*purana*) and the advocates of 'modernity' (*nutana*) throughout the 19th century and many great writers discovered the universal, everlasting values in our ancient texts, Vedas and Upanishads and in the medieval devotional poets like Kabir, Nanak, Dadu, Meera, Vasavanna and Vaishnava poets and also a message of humanism in the

Indian folk songs and folk religious expressions like Bauls of Bengal. On top of it the continuity of a tradition exposed the obvious fault lines of modernity that could be easily detected in the notion of the Whiteman's burden and their understanding of orientalism as exposed by Edward Said.

In India, modernism as a phenomenon or value is not an absolutely unrelated one without reference to the past or the future. It absorbs in it traditional values as well as new innovations and is indicated by the term 'continuity'. It is essential to do that because the spirit of India, as says Tagore or as the writers have observed over the ages, is not to reject anything. Everything has a place here as an alternative. India lives with many alternatives which become part of the continuity of thought and creativity and hence the choice which Gandhi or Tagore offered to us was not tradition versus modernism, but the choice of both versus the forced acceptance of one. This is the Indian way of thinking. Indian thinking is not logo-centric and exclusive, but symbolic or inclusive and hence India has no problem to live with many life choices and this is possible because as said by Tagore, one has the freedom of mind and boldly explained that 'true modernism is freedom of mind, not slavery of taste. It is in dependence of thought and action, not tutelage under European school masters' (9). He further mentioned in his

essay on ‘Modern Poetry’ that the joy of natural and detached way of looking at things belongs to no particular age; it belongs to every one whose eyes know how to wander over the naked earth. (10) It is over a thousand years since the Chinese poet Li-Po wrote his verses, but he was a modern, he looked upon the universe with freshly opened eyes:

Why do I live among these green hills?

The question makes me laugh, I don’t answer. My mind is still.

I live under another sky and on another earth—

In a world that belongs to no man.

The peach tree blossoms, the stream flows by (11)

In the unity of beings one realizes the spirit, *atma*. Hence, while defining modernity in his own terms, he had no hesitation to declare in Beijing in 1924 that

‘The impertinence of material things is extremely old. The revelation of spirit in man is modern. I am in its side, I am modern.’

In this way Tagore created his other modernity by stressing on freedom, objectivity, continuity of a tradition particularly bhakti and spirituality and prepared the basis for his Nobel prize winning book of poetry, *Gitanjali*.

The debate continued with full force in the 20th century and in spite of his strong views against European Modernism Rabindranath Tagore did not hesitate to say that those who were protective of the Indian masses against the "corruptions" of the West (Gandhi, for instance), should be reminded that "whatever we understand and enjoy in human products instantly becomes ours, wherever they might have their origin." This view was endorsed by Amartya Sen from a different perspective while stating, later in the 20th century, that, "the need to resist colonial dominance is, of course, important, but it has to be seen as a fight against submissive compliance, rather than as a plea for segregation and localism." The so-called 'post-colonial critique' can be significantly constructive when it is dialectically engaged—and thus strongly interactive—rather than defensively withdrawn and barriered."

John Drew in his book 'India and the Romantic Imagination' (12) presents a view against Jones that the curious way in which Jones is absorbed in Asian Civilization even while he asserts the superiority of the European is equally evident in his work including 'On the

philosophy of the Asiatics'. In his perspective on India, Drew says that Jones sometimes appears to have been as hedged in as any man by his sense of the superiority of European culture and by his acknowledgement of the prior claims of Christian revelation.

But when, a distinguished Indologist, George Abraham Grierson came into contact with the insightful depth of medieval Indian literature especially Hindi devotional poetry he was absolutely bewildered and in his response said that all of a sudden like the flash of lightening a new idea surfaced over the darkness of old religious beliefs..... No Hindu knows from which source this new idea materialized and also no one could with certainty establish the reason of its manifestation. (13). The darkness of religious beliefs is an expression which tallies with the notion of the conventional historians that medieval India is all 'dark ages' comparable to the 'dark ages' of Europe. But we all know that medieval India with its multiple flowerings in different field of human expressions like architecture, sculpture, painting, music, dance and most and above all poetry is the golden period of Indian art and specially literature. It is in this context that Hazariprasad Dwivedi by alluding to Grierson, convincingly asserted, that it was not all of a sudden like a

flash of lightening that things started happening but for hundreds of years the clouds gathered for rains to take place and more than that the unique thing that happened during that time was the crossing of boundaries of hierarchies to interconnect the tribal and folk conventions and regional distinctions (*pravritti*) with the erudition of *Shatra*-oriented epistemology of *Acharyas* (learned pundit) and concrete *Pauranic* (mythical) imaginative narrations and establish the complementariness of these two traditions of *loka* and *shastra* and also their interdependence on each other and a literature of love for the divine. (14) It was not only crossing but interrogating and even sometimes subverting the boundaries of hierarchies.

This cultural plurality contributes to our shared experiences in the field of languages and literature. As a result the tension between *kshtra* and *desa*, between region and nation, between particularity and universality, between scriptures and *lokavidya* (popular lore) or between written and oral is resolved by accepting them as complementary to each other. This being the reason, even

word like *desa* means sometimes region, or otherwise nation.

In the introductory chapter of Mahabhashya, Patanjali clearly pronounces, *prayukto lokarthah* which means that the *loka* is the authority of word, meaning and the relationship between them and not the classical rules. *Loka* is one of the important guides of human behaviour and *loka-mata* (views of common people) constitutes a significant part of behaviour before *nrpanaya* (polity) and even as the *nigama nicoda* (the essence of the Vedas) and the view of the *prajnavan* (views of wise). (15) In this way existing both in *loka* and learned traditions, a text has performed its function as a holy book of ethics for ages with the motive of common people's welfare as said by Avadhi/Hindi poet of medieval time Tulsidasa in his book *Rama Charit Manas*;

“There is no religion except for the well being of others. There cannot be a bigger sin than inflicting pain on others.”

The medieval *bhakti* movement was in fact initiated by the common people, mostly belonging to lower caste, poor, involved in low professions but always ecstatic in their love for God. Just to cite one example from the

Kannada *vachana* texts of Basavanna, the leader of the Virasaiva religious movement of medieval Karnataka:

“The rich / will make temples for Siva. / What shall I, / a poor, do?

My legs are pillars, / the body the shrine, / the head a cupola / of gold.

Listen, O lord of the meeting rivers, / things standing shall fall, / but the moving ever shall stay.” (16)

Indian temples are traditionally built, as explained by A.K. Ramanujan, in the image of human body. The temple in brick and stone carries the primordial blueprint of the human body but in time the human metaphor faded and temple became a static standing thing of brick, stone and mortar and its moving originals were forgotten.(17) The Virsaiva movement was a social upheaval by and for the poor, the low-caste and the outcaste against the rich and the privileged; it was a rising of the unlettered against the literate pundit and demonstration of the common man’s perception of the mundane world as something real and concrete not as illusory or transient.

Bhakti poetry was first written in the sixth and seventh century AD in Tamil and appeared in Tamil speaking areas in South but by 16th century it became a pan Indian

movement and proliferated in every Indian language of east, west and north. *Bhakti* poetry is, in fact, like a stream of flowing oil, *tailadhara*, from vessel to vessel, from verse to verse, from mind to mind, from god to devotee. It was a revolution that took the imagination of people by storm.

Shaguna Ramanathan says, *bhakti* (devotion) is love, faith and humility, as opposed to common forms of discourse that serve to delimit a field, mark off its boundaries, legitimise norms and perspectives. (18) Discourse is the practice of power through language that keeps a society stable, but there comes a point when such a world is felt to be radically insufficient. The heart, disturbed by love, moves towards a point outside the given boundaries and challenges common discourse. Then devotional poets like Kabir, Nanak and Meera and many others cross the boundaries of rules and authority and wander from place to place, as they sing of the love of God and domesticate godhead.

Bhakti is an alternative literary and philosophical way of thought and can be understood within the continuity of contexts but it did not reject the context rather by passed it and questioned the social and religious norms and

brought gods (Vishnu, Shiva, Rama, Krishna) from the temples and made them members of the human families. The brilliant inspiration of the Tamil poets enthroned Vishnu or Krishna as the Lover and turned them into yearning beloved.

Playing a crucial role in the background was a strong tradition of Tamil, Prakrit and Sanskrit love lyrics mostly of 1st century AD. These lyrics were neither sacred nor religious.

Some had a moral thought or religious belief cleverly injected into them but their core was of the earth, earthy. The celebration of life in these songs was of stylised romance.

With adult free love their main theme, they were to be found in Hala's *Gatha Saptasati*, Tamil *Sangam* poetry and Sanskrit *Subhashitas*, mostly in poems that have a double meaning. Some examples are:

Here sleeps my mother-in-law, like a log;
Me here, all others there,
O night-blind traveller do
not come and fall into my bed,

Gatha Saptasati, 7.67

Having chased the wild boar
In jungle dark—even your dogs are tired—
Don't go, sir. There that is my place, where bamboos
tall attract
The chubby elephant.

(Kuruntohoi)

Most of the poems celebrate love among humans, apparently unaware or unmindful of the hand of divinity and indifferent to the voice of the ascetic.

With the passage of time, this erotic poetry became weary. By about the sixth century AD, this staleness showed itself as the inevitable consequence of monotony in theme and treatment. Poets churned out types rather than poems of any individuality. There was no freshness of approach and poetry became rigid by following a set pattern. A theory of 'fitting language' (*tinai*) was vigorously exercised, which further enhanced the inflexibility of the poems. For example, any reference to a parrot or a peacock in a poem depicting love on the plains or sea-shore would be frowned upon, as those birds belonged to the hilly region. Cerebration began to displace creativity.

Loss of royal patronage was another reason that led to the devaluation of this poetry.

The Vedas were on the decline, Jainism and Buddhism discredited the notion of God, in fact there was a general sense of confusion all around.

It was in this atmosphere that the idea of God as a personal Being, ready to respond when devotion was intense, captured the imagination of the people.

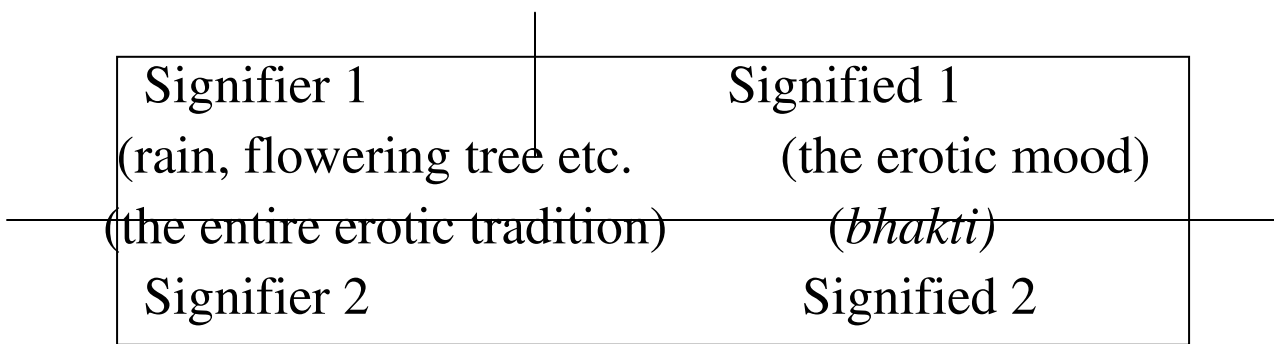
To look upon God as akin and near to the human was something substantial. It was an exciting idea and the situation could lend itself to ecstasy. It was not necessary to evolve a new poetics form to celebrate love between the god and the devotee.

It was easily derived from the lyrical love poetry of the *Gatha* tradition and Tamil love poetry but then meaning started emerging differently.

The earthen lamp was the same which lit the room of the hero and his beloved in love but now the light pointed towards the sky presenting a new meaning – a transcendental meaning. This divine love emerges from sensuous love but it turns ultimately into sublime love. In

the small circle of love, one experiences the expanse of the divine.

It seems to follow that, when a human falls in love with the Divine, the language of love cannot be any different from that which is applicable to mortals. In *bhakti* poetry the entire erotic tradition becomes a new signifier with *bhakti* as the signified. Ramanujan,(19) using Roland Barthes', Elements of Semiology: 'Staggered Systems' (20) presents this as a diagram:



One can give an example from a Tamil poem of the Ninth century AD, written by Manikka Vacakar:

I shall wear the *Kornai* bloom
 And feel the rounded arms of Siva
 In embrace; and have him,
 And feel dazed in love.
 In pure ecstasy I shall stand apart,

Only to pine for his lips so red
Pining within, I shall search,
Only to think of his feet.

The signifiers of love poetry are enlisted for a new signification (*bhakti*). The changes are subtle, only a name (Siva) or a context (feet) can change a profane poem into a sacred one.

The signature line (*bhanita* i.e. the name of the poet in the poem) is used to differentiate between worldly love and divine love (*madhurya* or *prema bhakti*).

The signature line centres the poem in a locale and a person, says Ramanujan, relating god to poet, poet to poem and poem to audience.

Thus, the poetry is not intended to be general, timeless, abstracted from here and now, but to relate to a present god or a specific audience with whom the poet shares his god, his myths and his *bhakti*. Now, God is no more inaccessible out of bounds – now he is brought from the temple to stay in the house because *bhakti* poetry is the poetry of sharing, touching, seeing the many in one. The *bhakta* and the god he worships become one.

It is the domestication of godhood. (21) The experience of *bhakti* is not simply ecstasy (withdrawal) nor ecstasy

(out of body experience), but embodiment – a partaking of the god. The poet needs to possess the god and be possessed by him. He needs also to sing, to dance, to quarrel, to make poetry, painting, shrines, sculpture, to embody him in every possible way. But in reality the god does not come to stay with you. It only hints at truthful living, with God residing in you (Nanak) – and also at the harmony of life which only love can bring.

In traditional cultures like India, context-sensitive facts rule and bind life. The dream is to be free of context and create an alternative paradigm, to reject the current discourse and subvert its value-systems. Hence Krishna, one of the gods of *bhakti* movement is black and not fair. The colour white indicates purity, fair play, power and authority and black is the opposite of that but, in reality; black Krishna possesses all that is divine. He is not a Brahmin of the elite class but is of the cowherd caste, almost a commoner. He is not connected with order, harmony, and the light of the heaven. He is rooted in this earth where, despite in their own, discourse-governed rules are not the most important thing. In fact, by breaking those rules men reach the transcendental state of reality which is the state of freedom from worldly bondage. As soon as Krishna starts playing his flute the

message of love is floated on a flower-scented breeze and all self-control is lost. The *Gopis*, the married cowherd women, tear themselves away from home and husband and come running to Krishna, the illegitimate lover (*jara*).

Paradoxically, in the discourse-governed world unruliness becomes the rule. Faith breaks the boundaries, stands outside discourse and addresses it in a wholly new and strange way. It is the faith of complete surrender (*atma nivedana*) for union with the non-containable and non-finite, the ‘other’, the transcendent which the phenomenal world is insufficient to satisfy. Hence a longing for completeness is the starting point of the devotional mystical way. It is a reversal of Gita’s model of *swadharma* (follow your own duty), *nishkamakarma* (follow it desirelessly) and *atmasamarpana* (self dedication) which is possible only in a state of equableness, harmony and balance or *samadarshanah*. It needed courage to fiddle with the model of Gita and create one’s own.

Bhakti, is the last of the great Hindu anti-contextual notions. It defies all contextual structures, caste, ritual, temples, sacred space, sacred time, the Vedas and the *Sastras* (systematized knowledge). And within this

movement, women defy more structures: gender, and all that goes with it (notions of modesty, marriage, dependence on men). Once again *bhakti* shows us how close the independent, defiant women of the oral tales are to women in the *bhakti* movement. Akkamahadevi of Karnataka and Lal Ded of Kashmir, both gave up family life, wandered about without clothes and the necked body covered only with their tresses, defying social norms of the male governed society and spread the gospel of *Jnana* (knowledge) and worship of Siva. In one of her vachanas Akkamahadevi says:

To the shameless girl
Wearing the white Jasmine Lord's
Light of morning;
You fool,
Where's the need for cover and jewel?

Akkamahadevi uses the mystic symbolism of the Virsaivas and Lal Ded employs the old Buddhist symbolism of river and ferry in her many songs. They were all socially ostracized but they cared less and established themselves as the precursor of a social movement of great magnitude by intertwining sacred with the love for life.

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