

# **The Parallax Gap in the Medieval Bhakti Poetry of Kerala**

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The thesis titled '**The Parallax Gap in the Medieval Bhakti Poetry of Kerala**' submitted by me for the award of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, is an original work and has not been submitted so far in part or in full, for any other degree or diploma of any University or Institution.



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*tasmai shri guruvay namah*

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Malayalam, is older than English.

- MN. Vijayan

## INTRODUCTION

The medieval Bhakti poetry of India is an enduring repository of literary works that project peculiar tropes such as repetitions, parallelisms, mirroring, polyglossia, subversion and disruptions, *slesa* (bitextuality) that use the intellectual love of God, Bhakti, as an emptying of religion rather than a turning loose of it. Though variegated in form, the Bhakti movement was pan-Indian in its spread and influence. In South India poets like Manikkavacakar ‘bowed, wept, danced and cried aloud’ (Schelling, 7) in a largely Saivite idiom that built upon the classical edifice of *akam* (inside) and *puram* (outside). Not just in South India, but throughout the matrix of Bhakti in the Indian subcontinent, Kerala has a special place, having produced many of its pioneering sages and personages. In Kerala, a region with traditions of Rama Bhakti and Krishna Bhakti, it was the Adi Shankaracharya (788-820 CE) who proposed a monistic philosophy (*advaita*) in his works, and initiated the Bhakti movement through his poems such as *Nirvana Shatakam*. Cherusseri Namboodiri (1375-1475 CE), Thunzhathu Ezhuthachan (1495-1575CE) and Poonthanam Namboodiri (1547-1640 CE) were the exemplars of Bhakti movement in Kerala which combined the great tradition of Sanskrit with the little traditions of local folk culture seamlessly as in a mobius strip. Slavoj Žižek’s work based on Lacanian theory, Hegelianism and Marxism, holds unexplored possibilities in the study of Bhakti poetry in Kerala. Slavoj Žižek (b.1949) is a contemporary Slovenian Marxist philosopher who uses Lacanian theory to interpret culture, literature, politics and philosophy and whose concepts of ideology, parallax gap, *petit objet petit a*, invisible reminder etc will be used in this dissertation to study tropes in medieval Bhakti poetry in Kerala.

The Bhakti movement originated in the 7<sup>th</sup> century CE in Tamilnadu though Bhakti itself is as old as the *Bhagavad Gita* where Krishna says *Bhava Madbhakto* (be my devotee). The etymological root of Bhakti is the Sanskrit verb *bhaj* which means to ‘divide, share or distribute’ Bhakti came to mean to partake, enjoy, participate, to eat, to make love. From such concrete roots it went on to take abstract meanings such as to experience, to adore, to serve, honour or worship (Schelling, xvi). Bhakti movement was pan-Indian in nature and saints and sages and monks from various geographic regions, belonging to different sects or even religions practising divergent rituals and speaking different languages and yet behaving in an almost identical

manner in their approach to God. The dominating note is that of ecstasy, a longing for union with God and to merge one's identity in the Godhead (Das, History, 149).

Bhakti movement in South India and elsewhere was characterised by a hydraulic upsurge in fervour for union with God by a long suffering medieval populace that sought to escape the chains of whimsical monarchy in union with the Godhead. In the writings of Kabir, in the Godhead merged Gods of different religions, castes, classes and genders. Hence God became not the Big Other of ideology but the Levinasian other whose 'face' is the chasm between the self and the other. For Lacan and hence for Žižek, desire is the Other's desire-unification with the beloved, which is so violent, annihilating and traumatic. According to Žižek, 'the subject desires only in so far as it experiences the Other itself as desiring.' (Žižek, How to Read Lacan, 42). Žižek says that this abyss of the utter impenetrability of another person, and the temptation it holds in a chasm, mistakenly identified as the 'face' in Levinas, finds true expression in Judaism with its injunction to love thy neighbour but applies equally to Bhakti poetry as well with its concepts of Samadhi, glani, fanaa and sama in union with the mystical lover (God).

The earliest Tamil Bhakti poems by Tippiattalar (c.250CE) were addressed to Siva (Murukan or 'the red one' identified with Siva.)The Bhakti experience is one in which in Wagnerian Gesamkunstwerk fashion, 'melody, rhythm, dance, visualization, poetry are 'techniques of ecstasy' (Schelling,4). These threshold Bhakti poets were shamans who foregrounded dance and ritual. The tradition of Bhakti poetry in South India was taken forward by Alvar poets Antal (c.9<sup>th</sup> c CE), Nammalvar (880 CE-930CE)and the Virasaiva poets Dasimayya (c.10<sup>th</sup> c CE), Allama Prabhu, Basavanna (1106CE-1168CE) and Akka Mahadevi. The 'je ne sais quoi' supplement in a person that propels love or hatred towards the other is the 'objet petit a' and it is the same term of endearment, cenna (sweet) used by Akka Mahadevi as she calls Shiva, her Sweet (cenna) Mallikarjuna or lord white as Jasmine combining the local Kannada idiom and the Sanskrit terminology. Also according to Basavanna 'giving back light one becomes a mirror,' and his mirror is the eating bowl of daily sustenance. According to A.K.Ramanujan, Basavanna is a master of anaphora. The winnowing fan is a god, the pot is a god, the stone in the street is a god, and there is only one god, our god of the meeting rivers. There are also inverse parallels such as 'a snake charmer and his noseless wife and the nose-less woman and her snake-charming husband, the inversion representing the encounter with the mirror image of the self as the other



(Ramanujan, Speaking of Siva). Žižek points out that beneath this mirror-image of the neighbour that I have created in my own self-image lurks the infinite abyss of otherness (Žižek, How to Read Lacan). In Bhakti poetry this abyss and proximity are two sides of a coin or two rhyming beats in a couplet.

The monistic doctrine of advaita or non-dualism, unity of atman and nirguna Brahman was established by Adi Shankaracharya (788-820 CE), born in Kalady in Kerala. He also wrote commentaries on the Upanishads, Bhagavad Gita and Brahma Sastras. Sometimes called ‘Thomas Aquinas of Indian thought,’ he sought to establish unity between various sects of religion through syncretic ritual. In his ‘Nirvana Shatakam’, Shankara says that ‘I am thought, I am joy I am Shiva’ (Shankaracharya, Hymn 3). The Bhakti movement later found its proponents in Kerala in Cherusseri Namboodiri (1375-1475 CE), Thunchathu Ezhuthachan (1495-1575CE) and Poonthanam Namboodiri (1547-1640 CE) who are still considered among the finest poets in the Malayalam language. The Bhakti movement in Kerala, though it lacked the religious and societal synthesising function it had to the North of India, was a syncretic combination of the Sanskrit language works and local Dravidian traditions.

Žižek says that the Lacanian Real has no positive-substantial consistency, it is just the gap between the multitudes of points of view on it. Similarly the abyss of the real opened up by Bhakti poetry is but the gap between the multitudes of views on it including the great and the little (margi and desi), exalted and non-exalted, raw and the cooked, man and unman (as the gender difference is formulated according to Žižek), dead and the undead, mortal and immortal, self and its other. Žižek also supports Ambedkarite thought based on his philosophical foundations of Lacano-Hegelian theory and Marxism.

Thunchathu Ezhuthachan who composed verses in the the kilippattu (birdsong) format, has come to be called the father of Malayalam. Cherusseri, pioneered the ‘gatha’ form in Malayalam. He was inspired by the pada genre in Sanskrit including Jayadeva’s Gitagovinda, and was a strong proponent of Krishna-Bhakti. His ‘Krishnagadha’ details the antics of the infant Krishna and is based on the classical ‘Bhagavatham.’ The magnificent form of Krishna as a divine infant is a child archetype and is articulated in the Bhagavad Purana. Cherusseri Namboodiri imparted a memorable Keralesque quality to it. As a result, it was Cherusseri’s Krishna that was the deity which was installed in the heart of the Keralite (Mukundan, 72). ‘Like Cherusseri Namboodiri,

Poonthanam was also an ardent devotee of Lord Krishna (Guruvayoorappan) and composed his masterpiece, the Jnanappana (song of wisdom) under tragic circumstances. He apparently was married for a long time without issue. As a result of long propitiation of Guruvayoorappan, a son was born to him. A sumptuous feast and celebration was organized for the naming ceremony of the child. But amidst the preparations for the event, the child itself was neglected and it died in some freak accident involving the cradle etc. Poonthanam was disillusioned, lost all appetite for worldly life and devoted the rest of his life composing verses of the Jananappana, in praise of Lord Krishna whom he from then on considered to be his infant son. He touchingly writes in his Jnanappana: ‘while the infant Krishna dances in our hearts, do we need little ones of our own?’ The incident bears uncanny resemblance to the one related by Freud in which the burning son appears in the dad’s dream, quoted by Lacan in his ‘Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis’. (Nizarudeen, 44).

Žižek says that the gap between Freud’s topological model (conscious, sub conscious and unconscious) and the hydraulic model (id, ego, super ego) is a parallax gap. Žižek speaks of various types of parallax. according to Žižek, the basic law of dialectical materialism, the conflict of opposites has been obfuscated by the new-age polarity of opposites. So this polarity of opposites has to be replaced with the concept of ‘inherent tension, gap, and non-coincidence of the one itself.’ Žižek designates the term parallax for this gap which separated One from itself. Žižek enumerates the parallax of quantum physics, the parallax of neurobiology, the parallax of ontological difference between the ontic and ontological, the parallax of the Lacanian Real, the parallax of desire and the parallax of unconscious and the parallax of the phallic organs where they serve the base function of excretion and the exalted function of reproduction. (Žižek, Parallax View). Žižek also posits the objet petit a as ideology. Žižek also complicates the question of belief itself as he puts into question the true nature of the believer who for him is an atheist who does not believe and for whom the Tibetan prayer wheel or prayer or ritual performed by others is the dispositive of belief as she/he remains in a state drained of all belief and yet in the pinnacle of fervour.

My own personal investment in Bhakti has been a therapeutic one. In the conventional psychoanalytic field, the framework proposed by Jacques Lacan which lays stress on the linguistic side of phenomena was the one that particularly appealed to me, particularly because it

doesn't follow a straight Freudian cathexis, rather following a more widely dispersed cartography instead. The exegesis of Lacanian corpus has been eminently carried out in the present-day and age by Slavoj Žižek. The triangle formed by Bhakti, Lacan and Žižek offers an analytic trigonometry for the study of bhakti in medieval Kerala. It raises the following questions:

- (i) What was the status of the mystic self vis-a-vis the dialogic self in Medieval Kerala?
- (ii) What are the parallax gaps in Medieval Bhakti Poetry in Kerala?
- (iii) What are the strategies adopted vis-a-vis plurality, diversity and ontological difference?
- (iv) How do the above three factors work in conjunction?

### **How to Study Bhakti?**

During medieval Bhakti period the framework of religious mysticism offered the opportunity for multiple points of view, (parallax view), ontological differences, and multiple strategies to be adopted in the relation to deity. Negation, identification and partial identification were strategies adopted by the self in relation to itself and dialogically with the dialogic Other and with the Big Other of religion.

The chasm of the real opened up by Bhakti poetry is but the gap between the ontological multitudes such as the great/little, raw/cooked, man/unman (as the gender difference is formulated according to Žižek), dead/undead, mortal/immortal, self/other.

The conceptual framework provided by the work of Slavoj Žižek has not so far been used by anyone in the study of Bhakti poetry in India. Sudhir Kakar, in *Inner World: A Psycho-analytic study of Childhood and Society in India* studies the gaps between Indian and Western cultural milieu, myths, gods, classical and local traditions, rituals etc in the light of Freudian theory and is reminiscent of the work carried out by Freud himself on the Oedipus myth and the later work on child development by Melanie Klein, Donald Winnicott, Karen Horney and Anna Freud.

Annemarie Schimmel, in 'Deciphering the Signs of God,' a phenomenological study of Sufism uses phenomenological bracketing to study the mystical significance of calligraphy, symbols, numbers, names and figures within the Sufi mystical tradition in India and elsewhere and is

reminiscent of the work carried out by Hans Robert Jauss, Wolfgang Iser, Stanley Fish and Roman Ingarden in the field of literary studies, in which the aesthetic object is constituted by readerly cognition.

A.K. Ramanujan, without direct reference to Jacques Lacan, uses the Lacanian mirror stage in Bhakti literature in his work 'Speaking of Shiva.' Ramanujan uses the mirror-effect with reference to Basavanna, about the encounter of the self with the other and its inversion. He also deals with the parallelisms in Akka Mahadevi. The three metaphors he chooses from three semantic areas are the arrow, the embrace and the process of welding, corresponding to the imaginary, the real and the symbolic. Repetitions and rhythmic syntactic constructions, assonance, alliteration, consonance (anga/linga) are taken up for consideration. Barbara Johnson has applied Lacan to the work of Edgar Allan Poe from a structuralist point of view.

David Shulman has worked on a comparative history of dreaming where he studies among other things 'dreaming the self in South India,' untying the knot-riddles and other enigmas which is almost Lacanian, the Tamil Saivite Talapurana, humour and love and wisdom in Telugu mystical poetry. Shulman and Velcheru Narayana Rao, apart from translating and editing Telugu love poems, have written the 'Textures of Time: Writing History of South India.' Shulman also has written a biography of the Tamil language.

Akshaya Kumar, in the new historicist study *Poetry, politics and culture-Essays on Indian Texts and Contexts* has sought to juxtapose national subaltern imagination across time periods in contextualisations such as 'latter day Meeras.' *Time, History and Religious Imaginary in South Asia* by Anne Murphy is also a work on similar lines which claims that whereas Hindu reformists used Bhakti as a means of harkening back to a mythic origin, Sikh reformers appropriated the idea of Bhakti as a precursor to new times.

Vijay Mishra, from a post-colonial point of view, has written on *Devotional Poetics and the Indian Sublime*. In *Post-Colonial Philosophy of Religion* edited by Billimoria, it is claimed that it was the influence of a new generation of Indologists trained at German institutions where Hegel was still in vogue that identified Bhakti as 'the true religion of India.' Since Žižek is also working on a Hegelian wavelength, this buttresses the basic formulation.

Harjeet Singh Gill and Eric Vikramjeet Singh Gill have semiotically analysed the Heer-Ranjha, Sassi-Pannu, Sohni-Mahiwal and other legends of Punjab including the Bhagat Puran. Essentially an analysis of the human condition, these scholars follow the 'collective consciousness that constantly participates in the continuous process of pulsational forces, which give rise to the evolutionary historical configurations. 'The semiotic system of 'Puran Bhagat' for example contains two constituents-distance and memory, where 'one is never really free even in solitude.'

In Kerala, the hero with a thousand faces, mother goddess and other mystical tropes such as Bhairavi Matha/terrible mother, in Malayalam have been dealt with M. Leelavathi using Jungian archetypes. Acclaimed Indian English poet Gopi Kottoor has worked on Poonthanam Namboodiri's 'Jnanappana' and translated/transcreated the text into English which has been published by the Writer's Workshop. MN.Vijayan has studied the poems of Vyloppilly Sreedhara Menon using Freudian theoretical framework. Coming to the 'little' traditions, CR.Rajagopalan has worked on Folklore theories and the contemporaneity and historicity of folklore conventions in Kerala while keep track of their evolution and permutations.

Devdutt Pattanaik has written on Devi, the goddess of India and the phallic cult from Shiva to Shankara. John Stratton Hawley has written on the trinity of North Indian Bhakti poetry. Charlotte Vaudeville has written on *Myths, Saints and Legends in Medieval India* and also on a weaver named Kabir. Kenneth E Bryant says that 'a poem by Surdas became visible in its linguistic and phrasal flux and authorial intentions as to what is expected and not expected by the audience is inferable from that.' This throws together phenomenology of authorial intention, reader reception and genre theory.

The immense corpus of existing literature and translations from Ezra Pound and Allen Ginsberg to Andrew Schelling have used historical materialism as well as dialectical materialism and focussed on the marvellous dialogic interaction between the self and god and not on the gap opened up by Bhakti in the One itself.

The phallic symbolism of the child has been studied, but this has mostly been Freudian and misogynistic. Speech separates the poet from object of desire. Speech is vicarious and indirect. Divine madness, which is how Bhakti is sometimes verbatim defined, has its Hegelian logic.

Psychoanalytical studies of Medieval Bhakti in Kerala have themselves been few and far between. The very term ‘individual’ has an advaitic connotation. But the study of the perspectives/possibilities opened up in the individual self by way of Bhakti subjectivization is virtually absent. In the heteroglossaic landscape of Malayalam literary history, the ‘other’ as object of love and the ideology of Bhakti and the ideological nature of belief have also seldom been studied. The lack of attention to the individual self in relation to the Bhakti poetry is most glaring in South Indian Bhakti poetry and particularly in the case of Malayalam. This gap in the real opened up by Bhakti poetry via its multitudes of points of view that can be studied through the Lacano-Hegelian manifold of the Žižekian parallax and the object petit a of ideology and other Žižekian conceptual formulations.

### **Chapter Summary**

The chapters have progressively been arranged as follows:

- a) Slavoj Žižek- An Introduction
- b) Bhakti in India
- c) Bhakti in Malayalam
- d) Unique Features of Malayalam Bhakti
- e) The Parallax Gap

#### **Chapter 1: Slavoj Žižek- An Introduction**

A cursory view of the oeuvre of the Slovenian philosopher and psychoanalyst Slavoj Žižek is attempted to be given in this chapter. His basic concepts will be introduced, as well as their relevance to the study of medieval Bhakti poetry. Something in the One more than the One itself is the objet petit a identified by Žižek as Ideology. Bhakti is introduced as medieval spiritual ideology in that it represented the unapproachable elusive ‘je ne sais quoi’ in the other. The mystic desire is Jouissance, which is a weird pact with the super ego not to curtail enjoyment but to structurally warp enjoyment itself. This can be formulated using Sringara Rasa which uses Sambhoga for meeting of lovers and Vipralambha Sringara for their parting thus forming light and shadow, Chiaroscuro effect. Desire lies in the details between the shadows of the

chiaroscuro. ‘Since rasa experience is ‘outside normal time and space’, neither the actor nor the character ultimately matter’ (Rodriguez, 178).

## Chapter 2: Bhakti in India

Medieval Bhakti is still the most important literary movement India has ever had. It was a complex beast of many limbs and heads, docile and ferocious at the same time, acquiring ‘virat rupa’ that encompassed the entire sub-continent. This chapter is pretty descriptive in nature as it attempts to list the major currents of Medieval Bhakti in India.

## Chapter 3: Bhakti in Malayalam

During the medieval period in present-day Kerala, not only were there prohibitions by Kafkesque law, but articulation, of the prohibitions themselves was prohibited. This segues into the hydraulic nature of medieval Bhakti (and Bhakti as a rasa) according to the Freudian model of id-ego-super ego and the Lacanian symbolic, imaginary and the real. The comical and humorous elements of the mystic as bedraggled vagrant, miser/lunatic/lover, the sublime humour and irony of Bhakti and also medieval authoritarianism and the Bhakti backlash in Malayalam are discussed in this chapter. According to the Bhakti poet Cherusseri, ‘when the king commanded me, I pretended to be a scholar’ (Namboodiri, Cherusseri, Krishnagadha).

## Chapter 4: Unique features of Malayalam Bhakti

Generations of research scholars in search of the originary truth about Indian religion have stumbled upon a dead-end, viz. that of the Vaishnavite-Saivite dichotomy. This is the mother lode of parallax in the Žižekian sense. Mystical traditions & the mystical territory, pilgrimage, Guruvayoor temple legends, petty rivalries, squatters and wanderers, polyglossia, Manipravalam, great-little, margi-desi, Lokdharmi-Natyadharmi etc. are also dealt with in this chapter. The cosmopolitan and multilingual nature of Bhakti meant that Ezhuthachan, Cherusseri and Poonthanam were compelled to draw upon Sanskrit as well as local vernacular traditions, these two segueing like the sides on a Mobius strip, as in the term ‘cennamallikarjuna.’ Bhakti lore has it that, in order to console a bereaved Poonthanam, Krishna himself slept on his lap in the form of an infant thereby foregrounding the miniaturization and infantilization of the deity itself as objet petit a of desire.

## Chapter 5: Bhakti and the parallax

Caste formations contributed to the rise of Bhakti in Kerala, Ezhuthachan belonged to a prominent jati, despite not being an epistemologically as well as theologically privileged within the varna system. He also used the parrot's speech ostentatiously to prevent the tragic fate as that of his protagonists from befalling him. Dissimulation is accompanied by parhassia or fearless speech as examined in this chapter. Žižekian strategies, radical disenchantment of Bhakti, sarcasm and irony are discussed here.



## CHAPTER 1: SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK – AN INTRODUCTION

Slavoj Žižek is a contemporary Marxist critic and scholar from erstwhile Yugoslavia, now Slovenia, whose works draw extensively from religion, theology, popular culture, philosophy and psychoanalysis-especially those of Hegel and Lacan. His first major work to be disseminated globally, was *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, a Lacano-Hegelian, Marxist critique of ideology. He also cites Karl Marx, as one of his ‘masters.’ (He is of course using the term ‘master’ in the Hegelian sense). Žižek uses anecdotes, jokes (sometimes lurid ones) and similar shock tactics to drive home his point. He cites *The Indivisible Remainder* and *The Parallax Gap* as his own favourites among his oeuvre. Žižek is also a qualified psychoanalyst, and much of his theoretical output is psychoanalytically inflected. His first major work was the 1989 *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. He often works together with Alenka Zupancic and Mladen Dolar, his Slovene compatriots.

What makes Žižek’s combination of psychoanalytical and philosophical method so useful for revealing the true nature of the media’s mode of operation is his strong commitment to the truth, but the full nature of truth as it appears today in all its relational heavily mediated intricacy. (Taylor, 23)

Žižek is a controversial and confusing philosopher. His vast oeuvre contains nuggets from popular and high culture. He dabbles in cinema, opera, literature, cartoons, classical music, jokes, popular science and the like so much so that no area of human interest is alien to him. Hence his oeuvre can be studied under the rubric of culture studies.<sup>1</sup>

Žižek is a Marxist, as well as a Hegelian Lacanian. He comes at the end of a long line of European rationalist thought. He advocates what could be called a ‘naïve enlightenment rationality’ criticised by the likes of Herbert Marcuse. He has often been called ‘Eurocentric’ an accusation he has never been apologetic about. He often tries to provoke his audience (in the numerous lectures in European and American Universities) using vulgar jokes and radical assertions. He is a critic of cultural relativism and of relativisms of all kinds. As a firm believer in universal rationality, Žižek expects his readers to espouse some sort of naïve Eurocentrism.

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<sup>1</sup> Graham Harman, the philosopher of object oriented ontology or OOO, calls Žižek, along with Alain Badiou, one of the twin pillars of contemporary Continental Philosophy.

Žižek's espousal of universalism runs counter to the arguments of the currently fashionable school of object oriented ontology, who espouses a post human notion of the universe. This universality is the universality of the social class derived from the conflict between individual and society. Žižek has himself been influenced by the evolution of Yugoslav socialism. Žižek would illustrate his idea of concrete Hegelian universality using images from art and literature and music (all belonging to the European canon of course).<sup>2</sup> Žižek displaces the 'difference between the universal and the particular into the particular itself' (Chow and Mangold, 2014). He would invoke Mendelssohn, Tchaikovsky and Sibelius<sup>3</sup> to illustrate the Hegelian 'Concrete Universality' as a violin concerto. (For him Mozart's 'failed' violin concertos like the Sinfonia concertante are not violin concertos proper, but merely operating in a 'concerting mode.')

For Žižek, the universal involves a radical break, a cut which in turn gives voice to the whole, the way the human orchestral voice does vis-à-vis the violin as an instrument. For the humanist in Žižek, the human voice is the ultimate musical instrument. For the aesthete Theodor Adorno, it is the violin. The tussle between the violin and orchestra, for Žižek, is akin to that between the subject and substance.<sup>4</sup> The radical assertion of subjectivity happened in the work of Beethoven, something alien to Mozart's oeuvre. Even in Beethoven, the balance between the subject and the substance, that between the violin and the orchestra is balanced in favour of the subject/violin. Žižek counterposes this with Brahms' concerto without the violin and Schumann and Bartok's Concert without the orchestra. For Žižek, all of these are instances of the 'violin concerto' but none of them are particular instances of that universal concept. Rather they are 'desperate attempts' to hammer out a position vis-à-vis that universality.<sup>5</sup>

Each time, this universal concept is disturbed in a specific way – disavowed, turned around, thrown off by the excessive emphasis on one of its poles. In short there never has been a violin concerto that fully realized its concept (a dialogue engendering a productive tension and reconciliation between violin and orchestra, subject and substance); every time an invisible hindrance prevents the concept's fulfilment. (Žižek, *Ticklish Subject*, 102)

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<sup>2</sup> One often gets the impression that Žižek has a rudimentary understanding of the fertile lode of European culture that he mines with spectacular success. He for instance, calls Lestrade, the comical sidekick of Conan Doyle's fictional detective Sherlock Holmes, where it is in fact Dr. Watson as any school going kid would know.

<sup>3</sup> Satyajit Ray for instance had Sibelius played in reverse for the background music for his musical film on feudal decadence, *Jalsaghar* (1958). The mind boggles to think of what Žižek would have made of that.

<sup>4</sup> The violin is the musical instrument asymptotically closest to the human voice, the human voice being the analogue of philosophical truth.

<sup>5</sup> Žižek uses European high culture references to illustrate his arguments. He also often cites the behavior of his young son. He, like a good humanist has an affinity to those in his immediate proximity.

Žižek has probably not read Bhakti poetry so far, yet the theological inflections in Žižek are conducive to reading Bhakti poetry in the light of his work.

The universal image par excellence is that of the child in neo-realist cinema, including those of Rossellini and Ray. Films are a great medium for Žižek, having been the subject of a couple of documentaries himself. An infantile adult, would like to imagine himself as existing without parents. Žižek would call it the hiatus that breaks the real from what comes before it. The pre-ontological real is cast as a basic mode of reality in psychoanalysis. This is the primordial, unsymbolized Real, which is nature red in tooth and claw. Žižek, in a familiar strategy, employs the films of the American maverick auteur David Lynch to illustrate this. For Žižek, Lynch's flicks do not attempt to close the gap between reality and its pre-ontological precursor by invoking such concepts as 'fantasy.' The spectrality of Lynch's visuals and sounds break barriers, the sounds transgressing boundaries between bodily, organic interior and mechanical, machinic exterior. Thus for Žižek, Lynch is the auteur of the Lacanian notion of 'ex-timacy', which acts as a sort of intimacy thrown outwards. For Žižek, what is admirable is Lynch's strategy of not employing an ad-hoc fantasy to tide over the break. This scrupulousness vis-à-vis artistic as well as conceptual material (including money) is integral to Žižek's approach.<sup>6</sup>In politics as well, concepts like tolerance (which is a fantasy) have to be used sparingly and he commends Martin Luther King Jr. for never demanding tolerance from white oppressors in his struggle for racial equality in the United States. That for Žižek, would be the politics of the Real, as opposed to realpolitik.

Žižek also uses Lynch's films *Dune* (1984)<sup>7</sup> and the television series *Twin Peaks* (1990-1991) where characters use microphones to channelize the big Other. This is what Žižek calls the 'murmur of the Real,' distinct from the Real proper. In the Žižekian universe, gibberish turns into the primordial Real.

Lynch reveals the gap that forever separates pre-ontological proto-speech, this 'murmur of the Real,' from the fully constituted logos. (Žižek, *Ticklish Subject*, 57)

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<sup>6</sup> Žižek uses David Lynch's film *Elephant Man*(1980) in which Joseph Merrick, a severely deformed man in Victorian England finds solace, later to be dumped into Dickensian squalor and find redemption in death, accompanied by a Tennysonian vision that 'Nothing Will Die...'

<sup>7</sup> David Lynch was not particularly fond of his 1984 film, *Dune*, deciding to use the anonymous name Alan Smithy in the titles.

In the symbolic universe as well, we can discern flashes of the Real, which occur in gaps in the symbolic edifice, such as that of law. In his book *Ticklish Subject*, Žižek tackles the Hegelian subject, saying that the eternal cycle of crime and law, as found in Kafka, one being the obverse of the other, is resolved in love. The real gap is between law and love, and not between law and crime per se. Žižek posits love and the law, unlike crime and the law, as belonging to two different domains altogether. If law is the truth, then crime is falsehood. It could be otherwise too, the law being falsehood and crime being frank honesty. They are seamlessly united as two faces of a Möbius strip. Žižek breaks this pseudo vicious cycle by positing the third mediator, viz. love. Law and love are not merely mediated, they are properly differentiated. So the law-love gap becomes an unfathomable abyss, potentially. The radical difference of love from law can be grasped only from within love. The person who discovers this gap, is already within the realm of love. So, there is practically no need for mixing up the two domains. Their union is in their sundering.

Law for Žižek, rather than constitutional law, is the Hebraic Old Testament law, with its lapidary pronouncements. For Žižek the Mosaic ten commandments are essentially strategies to keep the neighbour, your proximate other, from invading you. Apart from Lacan and Hegel, the Catholic theology of the English novelist and writer GK Chesterton, appeals to Žižek so much so that he even calls Chesterton one of his ‘masters.’ He cites Chesterton as saying that it was Old Testament ‘Book of Job’ which saved the chosen people, the Jews from eternal damnation and decay. They apparently, in a covenant with Jehovah, had a choice of endorsing worldly wealth with virtue and poverty with vice, which they did not. This could have left men with the unflattering position of trying to make successful men good rather than the good successful. Žižek’s point is that the radical gap between virtue and wealth underlines the triumph of virtue.<sup>8</sup>The virtuous are seldom affluent, virtue being its own reward. It is a negative concept in which wealth is compounded in reverse, and eternally divided. So pace Badiou, Žižek posits that the ‘eternal idea’ is that which allows a division. An eternal idea is not some sort of spurious infinity. It is a gap. (Spatially, Žižek would say the universality of the present world lies in the universality of struggles). Temporally, perpetuity of the eternal idea is in the perpetuity of the division. Here Žižek introduces his pet concept of the non-all, thus the non-dead being different

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<sup>8</sup> This is a far more significant concept than it appears, since oppressive monarchies like those in Saudi Arabia cite their immense wealth as their virtuous reward or bounty from God.

from the undead, and woman being unman rather than non-man. Virtue is not the opposite of vice, it is unvice, eternally divided into a multitude. Morality, in short, is a conspiracy. The substance and its subject are synthesized by the splitting, parallax. Instead of a Cartesian pineal gland, that unites mind and body, it is in this very gap that they merge.

The Idea compels us to divide without any pre-existing encompassing unity-more precisely (and paradoxically), every unity is here a form of division. (Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 590)

There is no human animal:

Human sexual relationships are an absolute gold mine for Žižek. For him sex constitutes the realm of the Lacanian Real- the primordial inchoate Ur-sphere. Before sexual intercourse, a couple might exchange looks, gestures, suggestive words etc. But this sort of noumenal speech must not be fetishized into some sort of speech before speech, a more basic, primordial form of communication.<sup>9</sup> It must not be something that reduces normal speech to supplementary status.<sup>10</sup> Žižek resolves this using the trope of the future anterior (eg. ‘in order to have been’). He illustrates this by using the example of the English philosopher Bertrand Russell’s profession of love to the socialite and Bloomsbury group ring leader Ottoline Morrell, where Russell himself did not know that he loved Morrell till he verbally told her so. Žižek warns against misinterpreting this as a movement from in-itself to for-itself, as if Russell had a pre-verbal understanding of his affections before their verbal articulation. For Žižek, the effect is strictly retro-active. Russell did not love Morrell till he professed it to her.<sup>1112</sup> In order to be liberated, one already has to be free. In this way Žižek often seems elliptical and mystical at times, hence his affinity with Bhakti.

Žižek refers to himself as an authoritarian, who prefers the later dialogues of Plato, where the audience participates only to rhetorically affirm the master’s voice, shouting ‘by Zeus’. For

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<sup>9</sup> The title-phrase of a book for which Žižek would ‘sell his mother into slavery’ is Walter Benjamin’s ‘Language in General and Human Language in Particular.’ (It is not as bad as it looks since Žižek’s mother is already dead.)

<sup>10</sup> There is an analogue from the philosophy of mind, where determinists say that human decisions are predetermined instants before they are actually made, thus rendering the concept of free-will void.

<sup>11</sup> Žižek would interpret the use of the surname ‘X’ by the Afro-American rights activist Malcolm X in similar light.

<sup>12</sup> For Hegel, every act retroactively produces its meaning. Žižek calls Hegel, an even greater materialist than Marx himself.

Žižek, it is 'Plato any day, over Aristotle.' The inchoate Real for him is best exemplified by Plato's idea of the chora in 'Timaeus', which he differentiates from the Aristotelian 'hyle.' This spectral inchoate Real was given contours by German Idealism. Therein perhaps lies the reason for Žižek's fascination with Hegel.

The first of German philosophers to identify the subject's role in constituting reality through active participation in it was Immanuel Kant, who posited that reality was not just out there. It had to be moulded by human intervention. This is the act of transcendental synthesis. But then one has to find (just as with the big bang) what preceded this synthesis. Schelling, of all the German idealists, gives the most concrete answer for this when he posits an Ur-ground where God himself is not yet God. This is the 'divine frenzy.' It is the Hegelian 'night of the world.' It is the realm of the irrational occupied by the psychoanalytic drives. It is the ungraspable ground of reason, where the eternally deferred finds a home. Thus David Lynch with his spectral figures and unformed monsters straining to take shape, is the perfect Hegelian.

Žižek is arguably the most provocative of contemporary philosophers. But he is also infamously Eurocentric. It would be anathema for him to learn that his work has been put to use in analysing medieval Indian religious poetry-the devotional bhakti of Surdas and Mirabai and Kabir. He was among the generation of 1960s that embraced Marx, even as others including John Hawley, embraced Bhakti and Indian mysticism. For Žižek, enlightenment begins not in Gaya, but west of the Suez Canal.

This 'radically Eurocentric' stance has been an enduring theme in Žižek's work. Back in 1992 he gave the example of the Congress Party in India being founded by Indians educated at Eton, Cambridge and Oxford so that 'the very idea "let's get rid of English colonialism, let's return to our autonomous India" was strictly a product of English colonialism' (Parker, 53).

Žižekian metaphysics has no respect for the 'crooked timber of humanity, out of which no straight thing can be fashioned. 'But almost all of Žižek's oeuvre, as that of his master Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, is touched by a spiritual zeal and mystical fervour which alas cannot be pinpointed. Žižek's abiding fascination with the cinema of Hollywood (never even once in his vast oeuvre does an Indian language film figure even allusively), opera, Shakespeare, the

Catholic ‘theologian’ GK.Chesterton, Henry James, and other figures from the Western canon and popular culture, could be read as a reaction to his own ‘Eastern Europeanness.’<sup>13</sup>

The one Indian political figure he clearly admires is Baba Saheb Ambedkar. ‘Ambedkar not Gandhi’ is a war cry or constant refrain for Žižek’s engagements vis-a-vis India. Žižek often cites Ambedkar’s statement ‘no castes without outcastes,’ as the greatest definition of ideology.

Žižek’s infamous scatological joke connecting German, French and English style toilets with the philosophical traditions of those nations (French revolutionary haste reflected in shit disappearing fast and out of sight, German contemplative idealism reflected in stools floating on water to be inspected for signs of disease etc, and English utilitarian pragmatism combining the best of both these worlds, shitwise) led him to collaborate with an Indian publishing house Navayana and its publisher S.Anand, who had written to Žižek pointing out the fact of manual scavenging in India and its not so rosy implications for Indian philosophical traditions. Žižek also delivered an annual Navayana lecture in Delhi in 2011. This collaboration also led to Navayana publishing Žižek’s take on the global financial crisis, *First as Tragedy, then as Farce*. He also conversed with sanitation staff in Delhi and attended a session organized by DC Books in Kochi. Žižek also frequently cites the writer Arundhati Roy and the academic Saroj Giri as his ‘Indian friends.’ He often casually claims that there is a ‘huge uprising’ going on in India chez the Maoists. Otherwise Žižek’s engagement with India and its religio-philosophical traditions are pretty limited save the occasional reference to Ambedkar or Buddhism and pejorative quotations from Manu (It doesn’t look good for Manu!), which are often curtailed by his own flights of rhetorical fancy. One of the aims of this research is to address this lacuna in Žižek studies and bring his enormous edifice of conceptual thinking in contact with Indian textual traditions.

The incredible profusion of social and political currents that have emerged in India post-independence and at least some of which can be traced back to the medieval tradition of Bhakti, finds no place in Žižek’s limited engagement with India. Equally significant is the process by which Eastern religious traditions, save Semitic ones, are rendered anathemas to Žižek. ‘Capitalism with Asian values’ emerging in places like China and India under authoritarian

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<sup>13</sup> Žižek jokes about this more European than thou attitudes, by saying that there is a westward of progression of European essentialism, and the British think of themselves as the true Europeans and the European Union as the new Constantinople.

leaders is the Achilles heel of that system according to Žižek, which in Europe had at least acted as a harbinger of democracy post the collapse of the Soviet Union. This has been one of Žižek's major concerns, where he takes off from Thomas Piketty's celebrated book *Capital*. The argument that oriental values and systems are hierarchical and hence do not respect individuality to the point of idiosyncrasy would dovetail into Žižek's entrenched critiques of the same. Bhakti, at least according to Vijay Nambisan's reading, along with caste has been one of the banes of Indian society, due to its promoting of a servile, unctuous culture of servitude and devotion to deity or master. Thus Bhakti cannot be directly addressed by referring to the corpus of Žižek's hitherto published work. But the same would be possible, if one were to go about it indirectly and thus, to paraphrase his own words contra Deleuze, 'take Žižek from behind.' The progeny of that copulation need not necessarily be Eurosceptic or counter-enlightenment in outlook. Kriya Bhakti as in the Vachanakaras 'Kayakave Kailasa' (work is worship) is the site of jouissance, just as Lacan says that work is the site of jouissance. Bhakti is the divine love of deity, the epitome of perfection, by the imperfect human being.

Žižek argues that it is precisely this imperfection that allows for love to emerge: we love the other because of the other's imperfection, not despite it. (Pound, 32)

Žižek's antipathy to Oriental religion is a case of Freudian negation. While detesting it in the context of the Syrian refugee crisis (refugees are welcome so long as they adapt), he is pushing himself more and more into the arms of the orient a la Flaubert and the courtesan.

A lateral rather than head-on engagement with Žižek would be more fruitful. As Ezhuthachchan says in his 'Adhyatmaramayanam,' 'the world, lulled, keeps seeking sensual pleasures all the while being devoured by the snake of time.' Here, one finds a lateral readjustment of reality and its time frame and not an intense apocalyptic vision with sparks of lightning and claps of thunder. This lateral movement and the impetus that it would provide to the study of Bhakti movement, rather than a dialectic of conflicting positions is all that is sought within this study. Ezhuthachchan himself was called 'kallukudiyam' or drunkard, this divine intoxication or possession, Žižek calls the constitutive moment of becoming human.

Madness is not therefore simply an aberration of the given order; it is the constitutive moment of becoming human. (Pound, 32).



Žižek's oeuvre as well as Bhakti as a movement is interstitial and porous in nature. For many people Žižek lacks analytical rigour.<sup>14</sup> This research would also contend that the ratio cognoscenti of the Žižekian theoretical edifice is mystical in its amorphousness, one which encompasses areas as wide and varied as cinema studies and quantum mechanics.

In Žižek's work, by contrast (to Marx), religion is the prerequisite of the critique of ideology. The religious critique of metaphysics is the first critique of ideology, and therefore the critique of ideology already assumes the religious standpoint. (Pound, 53)

For Žižek, speech is not just an articulation of trauma, but also creates that trauma in the first place. This is a kind of symbolic castration as Žižek often reminds hapless academics who are fated to introduce him at seminars. For Žižek to talk about someone while being oblivious to his/her presence is symbolic castration.<sup>15</sup> Speech is not merely an effusion of inner turmoil and latent energies, but also the prime cause of that trauma. Speech is a post-partum depression where the subject is tortured into revealing. The psychoanalytic school would read texts for symptoms. But post the linguistic turn, it is the entry into language which is unbearable for the subject. It is the act of getting born, by bootstrap loading. Language is not just the house of being, it is also the torture house of being.<sup>16</sup>

Truth is a kind of lie without which a certain type of human being cannot be sated. We dwell in language, yet there is a shady aspect to this dwelling, which often goes ignored. This creates trauma and markings. Man is exiled at his/her very home, of language. The torturing aspect of language is psychosomatically linked. Žižek smuggles the orgasmic inchoate Real into language. Language cannot be just left by itself to produce some kind of cinema verite truth. It has to be bullied into revealing the truth. Most of this dovetails into the spirit of Bhakti.

Language must be twisted, denaturalized, extended, condensed, cut and reunited, made to work against itself. Language as the big other is not an agent of wisdom to whose message we should attune ourselves, but a medium of cruel indifference and stupidity. The most elementary form of torturing one's language is called poetry-think of what a

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<sup>14</sup>Žižek calls the English philosopher Roger Scruton, the 'scrotum' philosopher.

<sup>15</sup>Thanks for a castrating experience is what Žižek would say.

<sup>16</sup>An analogue would be how social reform often creates the very orthodoxy it is supposed to repel.

complex form like a sonnet does to language; it forces the free flow of speech into a Procrustean bed of fixed forms of rhyme and rhythm. (Žižek, *Less than Nothing*. Ch13)

For Žižek, the godhead or deity could be interpreted as the greatest, above all beings, or simply the only existing reality.<sup>17</sup> Here Žižek abrogates to himself a territory of non-all. Thus Iceland becomes the realm to which the persecuted from Norway, supposedly the freest country in the world, escaped. Scotland was formed by expulsion from Slovenia of spendthrifts, so that if the Scots are miserly, the Slovenes are even more so, constituting an absolute of miserliness, just as Iceland would epitomize absolute liberal statehood.

Equality of selves underlines political equality. This can, in the present politically correct climate, be countered by comparing human souls with animal souls. If there is a hierarchical gradation between animal and human souls, why shouldn't there exist a similar gradation between human souls. Žižek gets over this by positing an absolute 'I.' This 'I' is the absolute self, the 'evanescent point of self-relating negativity. What is missing in Hofstadter's naïve argument is the singularity of the 'I' in which the subject is actualized. It is absolute subject sans any substance.

It is neither some minimal feature of my psychic content nor the biological base (brain) which instantiates it—it is merely the abstract form of self-relating, but a form which is as such essential for the Self's actuality. It is this One-ness which makes us equal in the moral and political sense: no matter how rich or pure our content, we are all Ones, points of irreducible singularity. (Žižek, *Less than Nothing*, 533)

One of Žižek's favourite ideas is that some writers create their precursors, like Kafka and Dostoevsky. Similarly writers also plagiarize from the future. Sometimes two works can be uncannily similar that no other explanation offers itself. This idea was developed first by Pierre Bayard in his 'Le Plagiat par Anticipation.' Voltaire's 'Zadig' copies certain methods of deduction from the later Sherlock Holmes series by Conan Doyle. The latter is fully formed, while the former is the inchoate unformed Real. Guy de Maupassant's work contains Proustian

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<sup>17</sup>In typical impish fashion Žižek compares this analogy to Rossini's cautious description of Beethoven as the greatest composer and Mozart as the only composer.

resonances which are uncanny. Here, for Žižek, Maupassant carves a space out of time, edges forward surreptitiously, moves up for a couple of decades, and then closes in on Proust.

In his work, *The Parallax Gap*, which he himself cites as one of his best works, he introduces the concept of the parallax. The Parallax is an inherent critique of a system. It is not something that is imposed from without. The incredibly complex system of Indian Bhakti networks can be negotiated using this as a trope. It is a subtle shift in perspective that often introduces the most drastic of changes in the outcome. This aspect has been used by Žižek to illuminate ideas borrowed from cinema, philosophy, theology, psychoanalysis, popular culture etc.

The idea of the parallax is supposed to convey the gap within the object itself whereby it fails to coincide with itself. That is why Žižek uses the rather lowly allusion of micturation and insemination which are two essential processes that are separated by the very same parallax. He also says elsewhere that it is perfectly normal for a person to swallow his/her own saliva, but once it is spit out into an external container, it becomes impossible for most people to imbibe it again. The same can be applied to the gap that exists between the mass of flesh and blood vessels that comprise the brain and the actual functions of the brain. He also uses this concept to illustrate the editorial fate of F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel *Tender is the Night*. Even after the author made a much called for rearrangement of events in the narrative, the fate of the novel did not improve for the better. The two different versions of the same novel are separated by the parallax. Žižek calls this the minimal difference, the infinitesimal gap, the Lacanian petit a. It is the petit a that acts as the driver of desire, the infinitesimal gap that separates excreta from bullion. In blasé terms, 'one man's trash is another man's treasure.' This shift from trash to treasure is driven by an ungraspable quantity X, the Kantian noumenal, which eludes our grasp. It is the excess that characterizes hatred and racism: 'what is in the other more than herself?' It is the object petit a that underlies the parallax gap. It is a paradox that exists, it is observable with a shift in perspective, and yet it exists. It is the origin of difference at its purest. It is not a gap between two ontologically different entities, but what separates one object from itself. This is the difference in calculus 'as limit  $\Delta x$  tends to zero,' between a number and its infinitesimal increment. This pristine difference at its purest is an object in itself. It has no dimensions or attributes apart from being a pure difference. The Marxist in Žižek would use class difference to exemplify this, via the Henry James story 'The Real Thing.' A rundown aristocratic couple are

portrayed as such by an artist, but they do not look the part of down on the luck patricians, so that the painter has to invite a ‘vulgar cockney’ couple to look the part. For Žižek, petit a is the gap that separates the feudal aristocracy from itself.

The term ‘parallax view’ was borrowed by Žižek, from the Japanese philosopher Kojin Karatani’s work, *Transcritique*.<sup>18</sup> According to Karatani, in the face of Kantian antinomy, one must accept their irreducibility rather than attempting a Hegelian synthesis. Reality is manifested not in the point of view of the observer or that of the other, but rather in the difference lying therein.<sup>19</sup> The crux lies in the non-compatibility of the two views. Pace Kant, one must be open to the reality revealed via the difference (parallax). The parallax is thus primordial. It is the realm of the Lacanian Real. The noumenal thing-in-itself can be approached only through the parallax. To describe the parallax, Žižek draws our attention to Kant’s confrontation with one of the major debates of enlightenment era Europe—that of empiricism against rationalism. Kant doesn’t choose one of these camps nor does he try to synthesise them, or posit the difference as some unfathomable sublime, according to Žižek. Kant instead, steers clear of the compulsion to provide some kind of resolution. Kant changes the very framing of the question. He identifies the limitation of the human intellect which makes it imperative to undertake a leap of faith to tide over the gap, rather than attempting a synthesis between the senses and reason. The Kantian transcendental thus for Žižek, designates a hiatus rather than a synthesis. Kant uses similar strategy to resolve Descartes’ thinking cogito (res cogitans) and David Hume’s dispersion of the same in the melee of sensory data. Žižek, like Kant will not pitch his tent in either camp, nor will he accept Karatani’s wishing away of the transcendental subject as some kind of spectral fantasy. The transcendental subject, has bears no correlation with sensory data; it also does not bear reduction to a consistent ‘being.’

Here, however, we should be more precise than Karatani, who directly identifies the transcendental subject with transcendental illusion: (Žižek, Parallax View, 21)

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<sup>18</sup> Žižek has never been one to shy away from acknowledging his debts, either to Karatani or to Jean Pierre Dupuy and others.

<sup>19</sup> Žižek’s favourite example is that of Claude Levi Strauss’ fieldwork about an American Indian village where two groups of people gave differing cartographies of the village depending on their hierarchical position in the rural society.

## THE HEGELIAN GURUKUL

Žižek swaps new age gurus like Foucault for old ones like Hegel. For him, Hegel alone answers the riddle of consent generation; why does the free subject give itself over to subjugation by power. The Hegelian solution is that the master, instead of forfeiting the body, which is subject to decomposition, internalises the degeneration, embodying it. The body, and the ills that it is prone to, including death, compels one to weakness. Mortality is the absolute master. Discipline thus originates in an attempt to save the body by incorporating the negative elements of mortality into the body itself. The exuberance of organic life, is thus calmed. The Master who disciplines is an oppressive figure. The master is an analogue of death, of a different order.<sup>20</sup> The obsessive disciple waits for the demise of the master to regain his freedom and partake of forbidden freedoms. But this freedom never arrives, because behind the master lurks the absolute master, ie death.<sup>21</sup>

When the obsessional's Master actually dies, the impact of his death is, of course, exactly the opposite: the obsessional is confronted with the void of death, the absolute master which was lurking beneath the actual master. (Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, 106)

The Hegelian quip oft quoted by Žižek is 'the spirit is a bone.' The absolute has to be understood not only as substance, but also as subject. There occurs the freedom of a forced choice, when the 'organic whole' is pitted against the anarchic singularity which destabilizes the whole. But forced to choose between an organic feudal order and an emergent revolutionary violence, one is forced to choose the latter. The latter is a negative force, yet one has to choose it. One is thus forced to choose revolutionary violence to effect conciliation between society and the individual. For Žižek, the revolutionary terror is thus a vanishing mediator between the old and new orders.<sup>22</sup> The same holds true for the tussle between *sittlichkeit* (ethical order) and *moralität* (individual morality). Thus Socrates confronts the Greek common sense, and Christ, the Jewish one. This inchoate universality of Socrates or Christ, in ordinary circumstances, emerges only in

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<sup>20</sup>The same applies to research guides too.

<sup>21</sup>This idea is explored in Franz Kafka's 'Before the Law' where a man confronts a closed door perpetually, till his death, when he finds the guard leaving the door. The guard before leaving tells the man that the closed door was meant just for him.

<sup>22</sup>For Žižek, Bhakti in India would be a vanishing mediator between Islam and Buddhism. He said this at the First Annual Navayana lecture delivered at India Habitat Centre, New Delhi.

total violence. The stability of the universal is the other side of the violence of the particular. Only in this way can universality be institutionalized, paving the way to movement.

For Žižek, the Hegelian apotheosis happens when he denounces the organic ethical order<sup>23</sup> espied in the ancient Greek city state. Given a choice between organic totality and an inchoate negative, Hegel throws his weight in with the negative. This is the point of Hegelian apotheosis. Hegel reconciles with the singularity of Christ, repudiating hopes for a nostalgic return to glorious Greek past.<sup>24</sup>

Hegel 'becomes Hegel' when he fully endorses the disruptive 'abstractly negative' skandalon of Christ's emergence-when, that is, when he renounces the nostalgic hope of a return to a new version of Greek mores as a solution to the problems of modernity. (Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, 93-94)

Hegel endorses a sort of reason which is imbued within history. This Žižek in typical fashion compares to the American con-artist who cheats unsuspecting targets by using their own weaknesses. Thus they become victims not of the swindler's cunning, but their own crookedness. Another instance of this sort of oscillation Žižek provides is the imposition of morality on politics, which ends up as imposition of politics on morality. The aestheticization of politics<sup>25</sup> also ends up as the politicization of aesthetics. Those who push for cleansing of politics against corruption etc invariably end up in prioritizing political exigency over morality. Support for someone due to moral superiority gradually lapses into a sense of moral superiority due to support proffered. The induction of politics into the private sphere (sexual realm etc) leads to gendered transformation of the political sphere as an arena of conflict between male and female energies.

Žižek argues pace Heidegger that the imagination precedes rational understanding. The sublime forms the ground or framework of reason. Received wisdom stipulates that phenomenal sublime forms the backdrop to noumenal reason. But for Žižek, it is the other way round. The sublime indicates the noumenal as an unfathomable abyss, that is glided over by phenomenal reason.

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<sup>23</sup> This occurs in the text 'System der Sittlichkeit[1802-1803].

<sup>24</sup> It is the same logic that Žižek employs in his endorsement of the surname 'X' adopted by the American leader Malcolm X. The 'X' denotes repudiation of glorious African past as well as endorsement of contemporary American modernity.SS

<sup>25</sup> For Žižek, politics is not the art of the possible, but rather, 'the politics of the impossible.'(Slavoj Žižek on the Iraq War, Bush, War on Terror and More. [www.youtube.com/watch?v=Iy6pcv3ALEU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Iy6pcv3ALEU))

In other words, it is not that in the experience of the sublime, imagination fails properly to schematize/temporalize the suprasensible dimension of reason; rather, it is that the regulative ideas of reason are ultimately nothing but a secondary endeavour to cover up, to sustain the abyss of the monstrous announced in the failure of transcendental imagination. (Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, 39)

Žižek together with his close friend and sometime antagonist Alain Badiou, forms the twin pillars of contemporary continental philosophy. Pace Badiou, Žižek foregrounds the void, the zero, which he calls the main concern of ontology. In the dialectic between zero (void) and one, multitude of being cannot be obtained by multiplying the one, since that would yield one, not multitude. Void, on the other hand, is the being prior to its symbolization.

The void is the central category of ontology from Democritus' atomism onwards: 'atoms' are nothing but configurations of the void. (Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, 129).

The uncanny thing about the libido is its ability to survive its own repression. Libido, when repressed manifests itself in other forms. Žižek, in a canny move, illustrates this using the example of masochism, where the libido removes itself from the immediate goal of achieving pleasure, and attaches itself to pain, the very opposite of pleasure. Freud calls this sort of modularity, where you can remove the libido from one object and attach it to another, the 'death drive.' This theory of Lemming suicide dovetails into Nietzschean will to power.

Nietzsche contrasts not willing with willing nothing. Even a visceral hatred of life has to be called a will to life. Instead of wishing nothing, man wants nothingness proper. Here Žižek refers to Lacan's take on anorexia. The anorexic, for Lacan instead of refusing to eat, eats 'nothing,' the void. This void is constitutive of desire. Desire is contiguous with lack. This is the Lacanian objet petit a, not the lost object, but the loss per se, which is given a positive consistency.

What Hegel already hints at, and Lacan elaborates, is how this renunciation of the body, of bodily pleasures, produces a pleasure of its own-which is precisely what Lacan calls surplus-enjoyment. The fundamental 'perversion' of the human libidinal economy is that when some pleasurable activity is prohibited and 'repressed', we do not simply get a life of strict obedience to the Law deprived of all pleasures-the exercise of the Law itself becomes libidinally cathected, so that the prohibitory activity itself provides a pleasure of

its own. Apropos of the ascetic for example, Hegel emphasises how his endless mortification of his body becomes a source of perverse excessive enjoyment: the very renunciation of libidinal satisfaction becomes an autonomous source of satisfaction, and this is the bribe which makes the servant accept his servitude. (Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, 106-107)

The notional network of Hegelian logic is constitutive of reality itself. Žižek is an optimist in this sense.

What sets in motion the dialectical progress in Hegel's 'Logic' is the inherent tension in the status of every determinate/limited category: each concept is simultaneously necessary (ie indispensable if we are to conceive reality, its underlying ontological structure) and impossible. This notional 'tension/contradiction' is simultaneously the ultimate spiritus movens of 'reality' itself: far from signalling the failure of our thought to grasp reality, the inherent inconsistency of our notional apparatus is the ultimate proof that our thought is not merely a logical game we play, but is able to reach reality itself, expecting its inherent structuring principle. (Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, 99)

The objet petit a, also holds the key to minimal difference. This is related to Lacan's notion of 'decenterment.' For Lacan, the process of psychoanalysis is not one that involves replacement of a fake core with a true one, but the very interregnum of a displaced centre, that destabilizes the notion of a stable core itself.<sup>26</sup> Here Žižek invokes the instance of Kepler, whom he places above the Polish Copernicus as the original revolutionary. Copernicus merely displaced Earth as the centre of the Solar System by positing the sun at the centre, whereas Kepler managed to decentre astronomical concepts by introducing the idea of the elliptical orbit of planets. The ellipse, unlike the circle has two centres and is thus strangely decentred. The Freudian revolution of decentring the human has to be seen against this backdrop.

It consists not in replacing the old centre (the conscious ego) with a new centre (the 'deeper' unconscious self) but in sustaining an elliptical 'decentered centre.' (Žižek, *Organs without Bodies*, 64)

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<sup>26</sup>This however runs contrary to the American school of ego psychology which has gained prominence in academia and practice recently.



Žižek relates another of his favourite Lacanian tropes, that of castration, with reference to the emergence of evil. The very existence of evil is stipulated upon the minimal gap between the centre (with a periphery and margins) and the components. Due to this gap, the centre need not always be the container of reason.<sup>27</sup> When the title ‘father’ is made into a symbolic one, it sort of eclipses the empirical flesh-and-blood father. Someone who is not the real parent can thus assume the role of one. Similarly, reason due to its conceptual nature can be reduplicated. There can be multiple truths. Hence for Žižek, evil emerges out of the symbolic edifice. It demarcates the hiatus between the primordial real and its weak symbolic reproduction.<sup>28</sup> Evil, in this sense is a disturbed tautology. The pater no longer remains one, nor does the centre.

Žižek, aesthetically defines evil as some kind of formal instability. Humans along with deity, has the power of the centre. This is a major trope in Medieval Bhakti poetry, where the devotee freely converses with the Lord. The deity is perfect. Hence there is no point in attributing freewill, of choosing between the good and the evil to the deity. The deity, sui generis produces ‘good’ from the centre. Man in contrast, can have virtuous reason (the centre itself) or the vicious ground at the centre. Other organisms are not self-aware, their will is not discernible to them. Hence their centre is extimate, outside of themselves.

This imbalance between form and content accounts for the inherent *instability* of Evil, for its self-destructive nature: the evil Will ‘wants it all’, it strives to dominate the universe, but it inevitably collapses, since it is based on an ‘unnatural’ inversion of the proper relationship between different elements and/or powers. (Žižek, *The Indivisible Remainder*, 66-67)

Žižek defamiliarizes commonplace concepts, jokes and proverbs that are common knowledge. His geographical location in Slovenia perhaps contributes to his naiveté, which accentuates the effect of his pronouncements, which are seldom short of the radical. This is apparent especially in the sphere of philosophy. Žižek opines that God becomes God (the apotheosis of deity itself) when human beings out of their free will posits him to be so. Here Žižek channelizes mystics like Mesiter Eckhart that the man gives birth to the deity. This idea is connected to the Bhakti precept

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<sup>27</sup>Žižek has argued, strangely for a Marxist, for a leadership of the elite, by which he means an intellectual elite like himself and Badiou and not some rich kids ‘meeting somewhere between Oxford and Cambridge.’

<sup>28</sup>As Wallace Stevens memorably puts it, ‘The moon follows the sun/Like the French translation of a Russian poet.’

of a human god. The anthropomorphism of religion is a matter of free will. The faceless, nameless nirgun God turns into a personal deity. Thus man like Atlas, the Greek god, bears the burden of creating the creator as well. This opens up the abyss of freedom and liberation. When virtue vanquishes vice, or when a community of faith emerges, a mystical divine corpus takes shape. Evil has the opposite effect, a self- contracting deity. For Schelling, hell is the ‘searing heat of self-negating divine ego.’ Schelling thus comes first in a long lineage of messianic Christian theologians, of whom the exemplar is Walter Benjamin. History is a field of contingencies, one bloody thing after another, a sequence of empty signifiers, traces etc which point at the ‘avenir’ the moment to come, which would resolve everything, and settle all scores, thus loading the empty signs with meaning. This moment depends on human free will. It retroactively creates its past, this moment of exuberance. The past will be seen in a new light.

We can see how only a thin, barely perceptible line separates this messianic revolutionary logic from the most extreme fatalism according to which everything has already happened and things, in their temporal process of becoming, merely become what they always-already were: the past itself is not fixed, it ‘will have been’-that is to say, through the deliverance-to-come, it will become *what it always already was*. (Žižek, *The Invisible Remainder*, 67)

For the Prague linguist Roman Jakobson, there existed a crucial gap between the Ur-realm of floating phonemes and their well-defined syntactical symbolization into gestures. For Žižek, this is the Lacanian concept of castration. For Jakobson, this sort of deterritorialization is the prerogative of the signifier, and not of meaning per se. Meaning belongs to the human lebenswelt. The phallus is thus the very agent of its own castration. The phallus, rather than pointing at embeddedness of the symbolic universe in our own corporeal selves (territorialisation), is a pure signifier, which deterritorializes.<sup>29</sup>

In *Parallax View*, Žižek compares the movement of value and commodity with the Todestrieb, the death drive. The spectrality of the drive is to be found in the market too. The movement from substance to subject is similar to that from money to capital. Capital is monstrous and endlessly dynamic and repeating.

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<sup>29</sup>One of Žižek’s favourite jokes is that, when man was given free will, one organ, the phallus, was excluded. When one desperately wants it to be erect, it refuses. On other occasions it contrives to embarrass.

Jakobson has developed the idea of ‘secondary grounding in corporeal experience.’ The example Žižek would give is that of the term ‘locomotive,’ which resembles a railway engine. Directional words are formed in corresponding parts of the oral cavity.<sup>30</sup> These are reterritorializations. But they occur against the backdrop of meaning. This sort of anthropomorphic mooring of language in the body is misleading, since language itself is ‘inhuman.’ Jakobson has three phases, a first one where a corporeal network is set up with bodies, exchanges and so on. This is the phase of territorialisation. The second stage is that of deterritorialization, where the virtual takes over, and the signs are freed of their origins. The third stage is that of reterritorialization where these signs again are moored to the body, and pinned down as it is.

It precisely is this lack of coincidence between subject and substance that constitutes the parallax. But within the parallax, such a linguistically delimited definition does not hold. In such instances as that of bhakti, the anthropomorphistically inflected humanity of the deity and its original deityhood, which is a parallax, constitute the bhakti. The supposedly benign realm of bhakti holds the radical potential to subvert existing conceptions of belief and hence it constitutes a radical theology. Thus bhakti constitutes what can be called a linguistic theology in addition to being a literary theology. There is very little that can be said about bhakti from within the milieu of Western canonical philosophy, and yet, Žižek steers away from this tradition even in his repudiation of other ‘Asiatic modes’ that his work can be read in conjunction with mystical lore even while being rigorous in its constitution. This paradox that lies at the heart of Žižekian epistemology constitutes another parallax, its separation from its own Eurocentric core. The philosopher at some point turns to shamanic, mystical, oracular strategies of a bhakti.

The consistency of the regime of bhakti, which enables us to call such a complex amalgam of phenomena as one coherent whole, is produced by the mutually buttressing nature of the elements of the parallax. Learning and ignorance, life and death, attraction and revulsion, love and the lack of it, are all mutually supplementing elements of the bhakti parallax.

The outwardly seemingly simple surface of bhakti literature, comprises the many parallaxes that constitute its edifice. Ezhuthachan’s mystical ardour captures the many variegated aspects of bhakti. In the culminating stages of medieval bhakti, its literature in Malayalam acquired a

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<sup>30</sup> The Malayalam word for elephant, ‘ana’ starts with the first letter of the alphabet which incidentally resembles an elephant.

maturity that is seldom seen outside of classical literature. Malayalam was inflected both classically and romantically, drawing elements from the classical literature of Sanskrit and the Tamil Sangam literature. Bhakti, while serving as the origin of vernacular languages in India, was in itself a plural discourse of immense complexity, articulating the erstwhile classical in the emergent vernacular.

Out of the many aspects of Bhakti, it was the divine aspect that captured the imagination of the masses and led to its immense popularity. In the context of bhakti, the local variations were immense, yet contained in the receptacles of the respective vernacular languages. Thus Malayalam derived from the proto-Dravidian language while maintaining its distinct allegiance to the Sanskrit tradition. It was from this crucible of mystical influences that the language which we call Malayalam came to be born. One of Žižek's favourite book titles, as he himself has said in his lectures, is Walter Benjamin's *On Language in General and Human Language in Particular*. Thus language proves to be a universal, even in the post-human universe of object oriented ontology. Thus language could be the only universal, and deity itself.

Ezhuthachan performs through his Bhakti devotion, an exorcism of the medieval spirit. There is little that is magical about his oeuvre. The term romantic mystic will not suit him. Žižek, similarly is trying to come to terms through his multiple polemical engagements vis-a-vis the refugee crisis etc, to come to terms with the recent and not so recent traumatic past of Eastern Europe which includes his own native Slovenia which was part of the erstwhile Yugoslavia, before that nation underwent violent Balkanisation and was broken up into ethnic enclaves for Serbs, Croats, Slovenes, Muslims etc. The ensuing violence is something Žižek has never been apologetic about. The liminal, in-between status of his homeland is crucial to understanding Žižek's oeuvre. While defending the values of European enlightenment, he often is acutely self-conscious of his own marginal status as an Eastern European. The only solace it seems for Žižek, is the fact that Greece, also bordering the orient, is the cradle of Western Civilization. His peculiar aversion to Eastern and Oriental cultures has to be read in this context. He for instance, calls the Bhagavat Gita, 'a book of Hindu militarism', which proves his grossly inadequate knowledge of the text, or his ignorant prejudice.

Therefore, one has to be aware of the acute incongruity that lies in wait while comparing Ezhuthachan and Žižek, even though the comparative method employed here is not of

juxtaposition, but rather the study of one through the other. Both of them have a tragic conception about human life on earth. For Žižek, though he calls people from G.K.Chesterton to the Norwegian terrorist and mass murderer Brevik, his ‘masters’, if there is one philosopher who is central to Žižek’s work, that is Hegel. With reference to Hegel Žižek speaks mostly of the Hegelian wound. He speaks of the wound which creates its causes. The Hegelian cosmos is mostly tragic for Žižek. It is this tragic conception that he tries often to dissimulate by excessive comic mannerisms, and by lurid descriptions of sexual acts as well as sexual jokes and puns.

Ezhuthachan’s central character is Rama, who is essentially a tragic hero, similar to Hamlet and Jesus. There is a bit of existential unmooring about him which makes him all the more likeable. It is this vulnerability or Achilles’ heel which Žižek would call the Hegelian wound. Ezhuthachan’s Rama is not the great all-conquering hero, the avatar, but rather a mystical human with a human body that is prone to ailments like love and other demons. It is this quality of humanness that makes Ezhuthachan’s characterizations fascinating for the contemporary reader.

#### THE MONSTROUS:

Žižek’s friend and sometime philosophical antagonist, Alain Badiou famously described the four fundamental spheres as art, science, love and politics. For Žižek, this is nothing but an attempt to interpellate the Lacanian Real, the undifferentiated and monstrous real, into the symbolic sphere. For Lacan the truth can temporally emerge only against the backdrop of a horrific collision with the monstrosity of the Real. Art and beauty are for Žižek, the clothing of the monstrous Real. Science similarly grapples with the Real, into giving it symbolic shape. Love as well is not a cosmetic veil of desire, but rather the gentrification of drives. Politics endeavours against odds to structure the subterranean into social order. Therefore, for Žižek, Lacan is not a post-modernist, since he demarcates truth from its doppelganger. The truth-event is inseparable from the Todestrieb.

According to Badiou, what makes an individual, a subject is fidelity to a master, like an animal. Similar attitudes underlie cults of personality worship. The same goes for psychoanalysis too. Without the master, even emancipation becomes impossible. The master could be the Feuhrer, or one’s boss at workplace. The last line of defence against fascism, for Žižek is the master. Hitler or Stalin are not master figures in that sense. It is the devotion of the bhakti to his/her Lord.

Human finitude, is for Žižek, a major preoccupation, as it was for Kant. There is some sort of metaphysical realm that places the homo sapiens on a pedestal over other species, where man is unfathomable, eternal, infinite, participating in ethical and moral dimensions. But the Freudian Todestrieb and Heideggerian Sein-zum-Tode, reduce humanity to corporeal animality. Man has a special relationship to mortality and finitude. In this space man can participate in the truth-event. Badiou and others reduce this to a realm of non-thought. Man cannot be reduced to a realm of non-thought, primordial innocence where man can participate in the truth-event. It is in the effulgence of knowledge and wisdom that man performs this feat, as far as Žižek is concerned. It is in the finitude that Kant gets outside the realm of metaphysics. The infinite is repudiated. The field of reality is non-totalizable.<sup>31</sup> It cannot be thought of a single organic totality due to the finiteness of the subject. Freedom is something apart from either noumena or phenomena.

The key-point is that the ‘immortality’ of which Lacan speaks (that of the ‘undead’ lamella the object that ‘is’ libido) can emerge only within the horizon of human finitude, as a formation that stands for and fills the ontological void, the hole in the texture of reality opened up by the finite transcendental subject. (Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, 162-163)

## THE PROBLEM OF VIOLENCE

Žižek has been called many things in his time, including ‘the Elvis of cultural theory’ and ‘the most dangerous philosopher in the West.’ The epithet ‘dangerous’ has come back to haunt him time and again. An economic crisis, like the one that occurred in the US following the bankruptcy of Lehmann Brothers, comes across as spontaneous and natural. But for Žižek, they are events of violence par excellence. Violence is difficult to pinpoint since it occurs in many forms. It can be symbolic too. There is a direct correlation between violence and power.

Demystification of violence involves doing away with red herrings such as imputations of communist violence. For Žižek, this constitutes a trap.<sup>32</sup> The obsession with Violence takes the focus away from the inherent fissures in the communist project. Communists were compelled to use violence due to their failure in the social sphere.

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<sup>31</sup> Kurt Godel proposes a similar idea in his incompleteness theorem.

<sup>32</sup> One of Žižek’s most infamous statements is ‘Hitler was not violent enough.’ Another polemical statement is that ‘Gandhi was more violent than Hitler.’ By violence, he just means institutional changes. Žižek would also defend Frantz Fanon against scholars like Homi Bhabha who claim that Fanon was not supporting violence.

Let me clarify this point with a detour through my critics who, when they are forced to admit that my statement ‘Hitler was not violent enough’ is not meant as a call for even more terrifying massive killing, tend to turn around their reproach: I just use provocative language in order to make a commonsense non-interesting point (Žižek, *Agitating the Frame*, 118-119)

For Žižek, the phrase ‘mother nature’ constitutes a misnomer. There is no such thing as stability or homeostasis in nature. Ironically Žižek would say that it is through rupture of ties with natural homeostasis that man emerges into culture.<sup>33</sup> Genocides have been perpetrated throughout history, on the Jews, Armenians, Circassians and so on, in order to establish an ideal stable man at peace with himself.<sup>34</sup>

The greatest mass murders and holocausts have always been perpetrated in the name of man as harmonious being, of a New Man without antagonistic tension. (Žižek, *The Sublime object of Ideology*, 5-6)

The law has its obscene supplement. This is not confined to the occident. Žižek says that the tantric is the obscene supplement to the Vedic. The tantra, for Žižek is the secret appendage to the Vedas. Žižek polemically calls Western tantra, popular in Europe and elsewhere, the ‘spiritual logic of late capital.’ It synthesizes the worldly with the unworldly, consumerism with the divine and pleasure with profit. It violates ultimate taboos. It cultivates notoriety.<sup>35</sup> It clears the doors of perception, or claims to do so. It is the ultimate in oriental exotica, a no holds barred indulgence in enjoyment sans guilt. Enjoyment itself turns spiritual. One does not have to perform difficult sadhna, but has already achieved perfection in the corporeal body. The body, as the Virashaivas would have put it, is the ‘temple of the living God.’<sup>36</sup>

In Hindu culture, it occurs as the opposition between *vaidika* (the Vedic corpus) and *tantrika*-tantra being the obscene (secret) supplement to the Vedas, the unwritten (or secret, non-canonic) core of the public teaching of the Vedas, a publicly disavowed but

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<sup>33</sup> One of Žižek’s jokes is the reaction of an American Indian friend to the term ‘native’: ‘if I am natural, does that mean you are cultural?’

<sup>34</sup> Another favourite Žižek quote is Joseph Goebbels’ ‘when I hear the word culture, I reach for the gun.’

<sup>35</sup> The pop singer Sting when asked about the gossip-rag rumour that he practiced tantric sex is said to have replied that he knew only ‘frantic sex.’

<sup>36</sup> Žižek generally steers clear of yoga and physical exercise. For him, ‘reading a good book’ would be a more exalted goal than physical fitness.

necessary element. it overcomes old-fashioned 'binary' thought, the dualism of mind and body, in claiming that the body at its most material (the site of sex and lust) is the royal path to spiritual awakening. (Žižek, *Living in the End of Times*, 7)

There is a problem in seeing Žižek himself as a wise man, or Guru. He claims that Oedipus is a westerner's messing up of the ontic and ontological void. The ontic is elevated into the ontological. The 'maya' that is behind desire is exposed by Oedipus. The point stressed by Žižek is that incest is not just prohibited, it is impossible.<sup>37</sup> The object of desire might be an illusion, yet it is a valuable illusion. It is better to stay true to one's object of desire rather than to get rid of desire altogether. The striving after the object of desire might be in vain and futile. Yet it is superior to the insightful wisdom aimed at in letting go of the object of desire.

But are these two levels (wisdom and everyday commonsense) really opposed? Are they not the two sides of the one and the same attitude of wisdom? What unites them is their rejection of the objet a, of the sublime object of passionate attachment- in the universe of 'Kung Fu Panda' there are only everyday objects and needs, and the void beneath, all the rest is illusion. This incidentally, is why the universe of the film is asexual: there is no sex or sexual attraction in the film; its economy is in the pre-Oedipal oral-anal one. (Žižek, Slavoj, *Living in the End of Times*, 70)

The illusory can acquire a real consistency, ie when it becomes a drive. Žižek here would use one of his infamous tropes – erotica. The erotic is the diametrical opposite of mystical religious experience. In sex, movement is an end in itself.<sup>38</sup> When you turn the means to an end, like a handshake prior to socializing, into the end itself, then eroticization happens. The ultimate end of eating might be the sating of hunger. But the oral drive satisfies itself through motions of squelching and biting.<sup>39</sup> This enjoyment is the same as that of the child during its oral phase. The break between the goal and aim, perpetuates the drive. So in a zombie like transformation, a simple act of satiety is made into an infinite cycle of self-repetition.

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<sup>37</sup>The same could be applied to rape, making rape not just prohibited, but impossible altogether.

<sup>38</sup>An infamous Žižek joke is that of a naïve lover who had no idea that the phallic movement was the entire point of the conventional act of making love.

<sup>39</sup>An IV drip satisfies bodily hunger, but not the oral drive.



There is a parallax shift at work here: from illusion as mere illusion to the real in illusion, from the object which is a metonym/mask of the Void to the object which stands in for the void. This parallax shift is, in Lacanese, the shift from desire to drive. (Žižek, *Living in the End of Times*, 70)

For Žižek, there is no originary void which is filled, or attempted to be filled, by various entities. This metaphor is clearly sexual. When a straight male is obsessed with his mate's genitals to the point of fetishizing it, then he mistakes the vulva for the thing itself. This it is not. It is not the gateway to the Real so to speak, exposing some primordial dimension. The vulva is never itself. There is a gap between the goal (of penetration) and the aim (of caressing, foreplay, cunnilingus etc.). This gap perpetuates the drive. This is the gap that separates the thing from itself. Moving from the profane to the sacred, Žižek would say that this is similar to Christ not being the absolute godhead. The gap between the object and itself is the sublime—that between Christ and God or that between the vagina and the vulva. These are sublime objects which cannot be grasped by phenomenal reason. Žižek calls himself a 'Christian atheist.'

Žižek often uses directly political terms in defining his notion of the non-neutrality of truth. For instance, the truth of universal Christianity is not that "we" are Christians and "they" are not, but rather that the gap between being a Christian and not being a Christian is found inside all of "us" and "them" (Vaden, 4).

Lacan famously said that 'those who are not fakes are in error' (*les non-dupes errant*). Here Lacan repudiates the idealist who rejects the symbolic realm in search for underlying truth. He also denounces the mystic or the monk who rejects the orgasmic real as ephemeral.

How then does psychoanalysis stand with regard to enjoyment? Its great task is to break the hold over us of the superego injunction to enjoy, that is, to help us include in the freedom to enjoy also the freedom not to enjoy, the freedom *from* enjoyment. (Žižek, *Living in the End of Times*, 74)

'Parallax Gap,' in common parlance is the ostensible movement of the object under the shifting gaze, based on a new line of sight. This observed difference is not merely subjective, it has a real consistency. It is pure difference. In a Hegelian fashion, a movement in the subject's line of sight

results in an ontological shift in the object. The subject effects an epistemological shift. Yet the shift in the object is not illusory, it is real.

Kojin Karatani quotes an obscure text by Kant called ‘Dreams of a Visionary Explained by Dreams of Metaphysics’ in which Kant uses the term ‘pronounced parallax’, which he called ‘the position of another’s reason outside of myself.’ (Kant quoted in Karatani 2005: 47). The parallax is the impact of estrangement on one’s thinking apparatus.

The parallax gap is thus not just a matter of shifting perspective (from one standpoint, a building looks a certain way-if I move a little bit, it looks different); things get different if we notice that the gap is inscribed into the ‘real’ building itself-as if the building, in its very material existence bears the imprint of different and mutually exclusive perspectives. When we succeed in identifying a parallax gap in a building, the gap between the two perspectives thus opens up a place for a third, virtual building. In this way we can also define the creative moment of architecture: it concerns not merely or primarily the actual building. Furthermore, the parallax gap in architecture means that the spatial disposition of a building cannot be understood without reference to the temporal dimension: the parallax gap is the inscription of our changing temporal experience when we approach and enter a building. It is a bit like a cubist painting, presenting the same object from different perspectives, condensing into the small spatial surface a temporal extension. Through the parallax gap in the object itself, “time becomes space” (which is Claude Levi-Strauss’ definition of myth). (Žižek, *Living in the End of Times*, 245)

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## CHAPTER 2: BHAKTI IN MEDIEVAL INDIA

Amartya Sen allies himself with those who seek alternatives to the Hindutva genealogy, by searching for a past usable by the Left. What we have here is a sort of 'Bhakti Marxism' which seeks to excavate an indigenous radicalism which has the right progressive values such as egalitarianism and secularism. (Guha, 235).

KK Aggarwal, the president of the Indian Medical Association says the patient has moved from the Bhakti Yuga, marked by complete faith in the doctor, to Jnana Yuga, when the patient is well-informed about his illness and medication, while the doctor is still stuck in the time when raising questions was considered insolence, a challenge to his authority. (Singh, Veer Arjun)

In one of the ancient Sanskrit lexicons, the 'Nanarthasabdhalaya' bhakti is defined as bhaktih syad bhagasevayoh (bhakti is used both in 'division' [bhaja] as well as in frequent worship or service). 'verbal root of bhakti is bhaja, meaning 'service' and 'worship.' Historically, the 'Svetasvatara Upanishad' is one of the first texts that speaks about bhakti devotionalism. It accords to Shiva bhakti the highest place in the scheme of spiritual disciplines. (Ganesan, 138).

Bhakti was a medieval religious-literary phenomenon that spanned most of present-day India. A large number of poets, singers and saints of genius emerged from the vernacular languages. They included Kabir, Mirabai, Surdas and others in Northern India, Andal, Nammalvar, Tiruppanalvar, Akka Mahadevi, Basavanna, Allama Prabhu etc in the South, Jana Bai, Namdev, Tukaram and others in the West and Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, Sankardeva, Vidyapati, Chandidas in the East. Bhakti had its philosophers who conceptualized a non-duality. These include Ramanuja. There were dualists like Madhavacharya. According to Yoshitsugu Sawai, the basis of Bhakti is not a union of devotee with God, but rather a 'distinction' between them, whom he calls 'objects of bhakti'.<sup>1</sup> He also recapitulates the widely cited etymology of the term 'bhakti.'

In Hindu religious tradition, bhakti is one of its fundamental religious commitments, the premise of which is the distinction between a devotee and God or gods. The Sanskrit term bhakti, often translated as 'devotion' is derived from the verbal root √bhaj, which means 'to

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<sup>1</sup> A Buddhist exegesis of Bhakti would find many similarities between the two despite the apparent antagonisms.

share in', 'to belong to' or 'to worship'. Bhakti is generally used in a broad sense: the objects of bhakti are divine or human figures, both individually and communally. (Sawai, 25-26).

The Sanskrit etymological purism belies the syncretism of 'bhakti' as we know it today. Like most other surviving remnants of the pre-colonial past that still exist in modern India, like caste and religion, bhakti also has acquired the status of being a colonial construct. The existence of a bhakti-textuality and community of bhakti that predates the colonial era, refutes this claim. Orientalist writers like Grierson, Monier-Williams and Albrecht Weber along with HH Wilson tried to create a monotheistic, <sup>2</sup> Biblical analogue of Christianity in Bhakti. Wilson for instance categorized the Gaudiya Sampraday inspired by Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, as bhakti, being oblivious to the existence of other sampradays. <sup>3</sup> Albrecht Weber and Lorinsier recast Krishna devotion as 'Bhakti religion' with the Bhagavat Gita as its scripture. Monier-Williams was a missionary active in Thiruvananthapuram in Kerala, who translated the Sakuntalam into English and also was a lexicographer and major Sanskritist of his time. He was instrumental in the systematic neglect of Kerala Bhakti rendering it alien to the debates on pan-Indian bhakti. Monier-Williams, bent upon identifying Bhakti with Vaishnavism, seems oblivious to the oeuvre of Poonthanam Namboodiri, Cherusseri Namboodiri and also Thunchathu Ezhuthachan, who were widely popular in the Kerala <sup>4</sup> of his time. Exigencies of a missionary career pushed him towards reifying bhakti as a linear religious construct.

In short, bhakti through the writings of Monier-Williams got more firmly defined as a monotheism in its Western technical sense, that is, as a religion of love and devotion for a personal God, accompanied by a feeling of otherness on the part of man in relation to him. (Sharma, 303-304)

During the colonial period, in a book that was curiously entitled 'Hindu Mysticism' and was dedicated to the British Governor of Bengal, Surendra Nath Dasgupta describes five varieties of Indian mysticism. These are the ritualistic form of mysticism which used to include ritual sacrifice, the Upanishadic, and the Yogic, and the Buddhist in addition to Bhakti. For Dasgupta, these five are more or less distinct categories. For him mysticism does not mean syncretism as it

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<sup>2</sup> At the beginning of this research, that was my own simplistic conception of bhakti.

<sup>3</sup> Grierson, George A, 'Sketch of the Religious Sects of the Hindus.'

<sup>4</sup> Monier-Williams was stationed in colonial Travancore which is part of present-day Kerala.

means in contemporary India, where a syncretic religion based on Bhakti or Sufism is often promoted as the epitome of ‘vernacular secularism’ or to assuage hurt religious sentiments. For Dasgupta, the majesty of Indian mysticism lies definitely not in its syncretism.

In addition there are some which are of a syncretistic nature, exhibiting elements of belief and duties of two or three distinct types of mysticism in combination. I could not present them all. (Dasgupta, x)

According to Ramdat Bharadwaj, Bhakti can be classified into *daya*, *vatsalya* and *sakhya* in addition to a fourfold classification into *tamasha*, *rajasa*, *sattvika*, and *nirguna*.

Bhakti has been classified as of 4 kinds – the *tamasa*, which includes violence, hypocrisy and malice; the *rajasa*, which includes fame, sensual enjoyment and supremacy over others; and the *sattvika* which includes the sense of duty, and the *nirguna* which transports the mind into God.

Bhakti has also been classified as a. Filial (*daya*) b. Parental (*vatsalya*) c. Friendship (*sakhya*) (Bharadwaj, 158)

### RASA AND BHAKTI

Beginning with a sense of awe (*bhayanaka*) initially, the same devotion (*bhakti*) of the individual self towards the supreme Being tends to become a sweet flow of lovable feelings of the highest order in its development. Naturally, in the mature and highly evolved state, *bhakti* enjoys the supreme status of a sentiment; it becomes a *rasa* in itself. (Ganesan, 137)

Medieval Bhakti pervaded art forms such as music, dance and theatre. These art forms also followed the *Rasa* theory of the *Natyasastra*. Thus there emerged a merging together of Bhakti and *Rasa*, two of the strongest currents in Indian cultural history. All these art forms were devotional and they saw God as Real-as wife, husband, paramour, succour, child or master. Bhakti took two forms in these art forms-Ardra (soft) Bhakti and Drpta (vehement) Bhakti. It was a reaction to an *anubhava*, an experiential grasp of the deity inside the temple, or a vision of the beloved. Philosophy and ritual were transcended by Bhakti in this way. The sense of surrendering before the deity was prominent. Surrender (*saranagati*) was already present in the

Buddhist tradition. Saranagati was also part of the Vedic tradition, and is present in the Bhagavat Gita. The 'Bhagavata Purana' was a major text of Bhakti.

The deity (Bhagavan) could not be possessed, but could be induced by re-enactments via the performing arts. These contained a series of anubhavas or experiential episodes. In these personas like Hiranyakashipu fought the deity, who appeared at the very end and saved the day. These were instances of Drpta Bhakti.

In the original *Natyasastra*, there was no mention of the Bhakti Rasa. This was a later conception. The eight original rasas had a hierarchy and among these Srngara and Veera were the predominant rasas and all the others were subordinate to them. Srngara came under Ardra Bhakti and Veera was Drpta Bhakti.

These art forms that imbued Bhakti contained both the classical and the folk, the great and little traditions, the margi and the desi. Some of these art forms were non-corporeal, like music and they expressed devotion to the deity as well as the plight of the singer. These became personal expressions of devotion. Tradition became individualised in these songs. The two major rasas involved were srngara and veera. Through various vibhavas and anubhavas that proceeded through other sancharibhavas, these rasa were attained. These songs expressed art experience as intense personal emotions.

In order to express a rasa as a relieving of personal experience, it had to be made general to all sahrdayas or resonant hearts. This had to be applied to all rasas passing through various vibhavas and anubhavas. The rasa was experienced in the totality of the audience. The same was also experienced by the actor, but he/she was self-conscious of it. The actor was a receptacle. The audience comprised the mobile or the 'jangama.' In the Arayar Seva tradition the deity is the audience and the human audience comprised eavesdroppers.

The poet is only the 'rasavesha' or the one who infused it with rasa. Thus rasa could exist in the character, the poet, the actor and the audience combined or in the audience alone. If anyone reacted personally to a play, it was deemed a failure. It had to be a collective experience. Thus a new rasa was discovered, the santa rasa. Witnessing became possible because of the santa rasa. In the concept of 'moksha' in the sramana parampara or the Buddhist tradition of orders, the seeds of santa rasa was present, or so says Aswaghosha.



The three major virtues or 'gunas' according to Dandin were sweetness, softness and brilliance (madhura, komala, kantha). In the Gaudiya tradition for example, Bhakti is the highest bhava. In Bhakti mysticism sweetness (madhura) becomes significant. This is possible because of total surrender or saranagati.

The great Bhakti saints like Kabir and Tulsidas operating out of Kasi, brought the arts out of the palace and gave the Bhakti edifice its medieval form. Madhusudan Saraswati, a contemporary of Kabir wrote the 'Bhagavat Bhakti Rasayanam,' which was about Bhakti rasa. According to this, mind is like wax. It has to be evaporated so that nothing remains. It is hard when cold. It has to be heated up to melt it so that it can be given different shapes. It starts melting. This is the play. Thus santa rasa is not about making the mind calm, but not allowing the mind to exist. It had to be made, through ardra bhakti, soft as wax. Great Bhaktas were pushing an emotion aggressively to lead it to Bhakti. 'Yantras' and such technologies were part of the Bhakti edifice.

In the plastic arts various obstacles that came into your mind had to be surmounted. Mental forces had to be done away with to attain pleasure or 'ananda.' Bhakti was both an end (upadhi) and means (upadheya). Bhakti extended poetry to another level. Those who dedicated poems to kings were lesser poets than those who devoted their works to God.

Rupa Goswami gave form to what was already existing. Abhinava Gupta also accepted Bhakti as the 'angirasa' or the greatest rasa.

Any of the eight rasas can be converted into Bhakti rasa. Not just conjugal love, but other rasas involving veera, bhayanaka and adbhuta could be transformed into bhakti. Adbhuta created by Rama, Ravana etc were at the core of Bhakti. Sringara and Veera are rasa since they could be universalised (sadhrikarna). Similarly Bhakti was also transcended. It was at the same time immanent also. There was sagun and nirgun bhakti within the philosophical debates of the time. But within Bhakti there was to be no division. In plays like *Uttaramacharita* the melancholy of lord Rama can be experienced on a human level. This was possible due to the karuna rasa or divine piety, or the grace of god. Bhakti also makes up for the lack of a playful (lila) rasa.

Like the concept of bhakti with which it is often connected, lila suggests both transcending uniqueness and shared experience. If the latter invites human analogies and explanations, the former represents inexplicable transcendence. (Carman, 230).

In drpta or vehement Bhakti it was not the individual who was fighting, but God. The so-called villainous characters like Ravana, Hiranyakashipu and Kamsa were Bhaktas. In Bhakti you realise you are because of the deity and the deity alone exist and you simply do not.

Conceptually, the major move that allows the 16th century Vaisnava sampradayas to anchor their theology of devotional feeling is to use the Sanskrit theory of rasa and bhava, substituting in pride of place bhakti-rasa instead of shringara, the erotic mood of classical poetry. The systematic articulation maybe seen in schematic texts like the 'Bhaktirasamrtasindhu' from the 1540s, but what is more important is that the theology is used to justify the devotional practices, developed earlier, of the Vaishnava groups. (Behl, 296).

### BHAKTI AS EMOTION

Hawley has suggested that the notion of a bhakti 'movement' is a 'cultural step-child of the nationalist movement' and dates to perhaps no earlier than the 4th decade of the last century. Indeed it has been convincingly argued that the idea of a coherent movement owes to Hazari Prasad Dwivedi's translation of Grierson's notion of bhakti as a religious revolution into the Hindi phrase, bhakti andolan. There is evidence of a self-consciousness of bhakti being a unique religious idea with a specific chronological and geographical progression from about the early 18th century. (Jagannathan, 15)

There were canonical anthologies of early Tamil Bhakti poetry collected in separate volumes of Saivite and Vaisnavite Bhakti poetry – 'Thirumurai' and 'Nalayira Divya Prabandham.' Though love and valour were the values of the heroic age, bhakti conceived of a love different from the patriarchal expression of love within the family structure. Bhakti set in motion a feminine expression in arts and poetry. Bhakti unlike Jainism and Buddhism is a surrendering of the heart and not an intellectual compassion. Raison d'etre of Bhakti was the unbridled unleashing of the powers of the human heart. It espoused 'parama prema swaroopa' or ultimate love. In Thiruppavai, the Bhakti saint Andal asks for ghee and pongal and worldly goods. Bhakti was not a negation of eros, but its extention. It did not espouse vairagya. It embraced life in all its facets. For this reason, bhakti can encompass a spectrum of emotions, from medieval Darshan to present-day Bollywood.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> In Bollywood, the reigning stars often literally give darshan to fans, from custom-built balconies of their mansions.

One can track the career of the word bhakti through a staggering number of ways, from the earliest oral narratives to the latest Bollywood films, from individual engagement with a deity in a moment of virtual contact (darshan) to the imagination of a unified yet heterogenous nation. (Novetzke, 9).

All human emotions were accommodated within bhakti. It was an end in itself and not the means to something else, according to Utpala Deva who wrote 'Siva Stotravali' in the 11<sup>th</sup> century CE. In Vaishnavite Bhakti, this experience of the here and now is through 'Krishna Leela,' or the divine playfulness of the lord. In Saivite Bhakti the same is channelled through the cosmic dance of Shiva. The difference between Vaisnavite and Saivite imagination is that the Vaisnavite imagination is melodic, since melody is a linear phenomenon whereas Saivite imagination is rhythmic. The sound of the damaru or the drum is the template of Saivite rhythmic imagination. The co-existence of beauty and terror can be found in Saivite Bhakti. This sort of complexity can be accommodated within Saivite imagination. The five cosmic functions of the supreme being are srshti (creation), palana (nourishment/protection), nasha (destruction), thirodhana (disappearance), and anugraha (blessing). Transformation, in rituals and elsewhere (though bhakti abhors ritual) is achieved through divine grace by energy transformations. There is no linearity or contiguity in this transformation. It is instant and takes place in the here and now, a la Zen or Satori. Bhakti assures you of no material gains. It embodies undivided bliss, not cut off from the cosmic truth. Whereas in Buddhism and Jainism, freedom is freedom away from this world, in bhakti, freedom is freedom in this world.

In the 'Naradabhaktisutra' it is said that 'wherever my devotees are singing and dancing, I'm there.' Art and poetry are not about bhakti or means to express bhakti. They are the very essence of bhakti.

### TANTRA AND BHAKTI:

In Tantrik Upasana or worship there are many devatas or deities worshipped to get spiritual benefits. Yantra is the visual vibration of the deity whereas mantra is the aural vibration of the deity. Tantra views the universe as a circle of energies. The human body is its microcosm. The universe at large is the macrocosm. There are 5 elements both within the corpus and outside of it. Tantra finds the centre of experience through 'mantrasadhana' and 'yantrasadhana' which are

‘upayas’ or techniques. They accept sex as part of soteriology or salvation. Anything can be transformed into divine substance. In Bhakti on the other hand, there is only unconditional surrender and no means and end binaries in operation. There is no linearity. You do not want to be liberated or bound. You are free wherever you are. There is no hierarchy in bhakti.

Thus, though there is a tantric element in Bhakti. But tantra is not the essence of bhakti. Bhakti is corresponding to Vedanta in Agami tradition where rituals are introjected. You do not go to a temple, but worship the deity within. Vedanta leads to complete non-duality. Bhakti also leads to it. The metaphor used in bhakti is that of ‘melting into the beloved.’

Bhakti stresses on the importance of visualization and imagination or ‘bhavana.’ The imagination changes the external reality. The more you visualize, your consciousness influences external material reality. ‘Bhavam tatbhavati’ or ‘as you think, so it happens.’ In Tantra, the imagination is a structured one. But in bhakti the imagination is free and spontaneous. Bhakti as a rasa is sui generis, existing as a form of consciousness. The accessible form of Bhakti consciousness that has become popular is Krishna consciousness.

According to Rupa Gosvamin, Krishna consciousness evokes through three steps:(1) Sadhana bhakti, devotion in practice; (2) bhava-bhakti, devotion in ecstasy; and (3) prema-bhakti, devotion in pure love of God. It should be noted that sadhana-bhakti is further divided into viddhi and raganuga and it is often said that unless one graduates to the raganuga part of sadhana-bhakti, as stated earlier, the highest level of Krishna consciousness is not generally attained. (Rosen, 117-118).

#### THE FOUR BHAKTI SAMPRADAYS

The four Bhakti Sampradays or char sampraday, derive from:

Ramanuja(c.1017-1137),<sup>6</sup> proponent of Visishtadvaita

Madhva(13th century), a dualist saint

Vallabha (1479-1531), an advaitin, and

Nimbarka (12th century)

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<sup>6</sup> Whose thousandth anniversary falls in 2017.

Sri Vaishnavas were the major Vaishnava cult in Southern India. In Bengal that was the Gaudiya Sampraday, inspired by Chaitanya, and in Maharashtra that of Vithoba. The sampradays were cultic sects which had strict genealogies of gurus and disciples. Initiation rituals or deeksha led to primacy of the guru figure. Even Lord Krishna is said to have had a guru in the sun-worshipper Angiras. The sampraday could be confined to celebrate monks or could include a cross-section of society itself, true to bhakti's egalitarian precepts. The sampradays, especially the Vaishnava ones were inspired by the Vedas and Puranas and were not operating outside the ambit of the orthodox religious canon, though they were occasionally infused by esoteric texts and rituals such as the agamic rites. Kinship metaphors came to replace the devotee-deity, master-student relations.

Social hierarchies were sometimes observed. The Vaisnava nerve centre at Srirangam for instance, where anti-caste polemicists like Pillai Lokacharya operated, was out of bounds for lower classes. According to Gavin Flood, entire sects came to be composed of outcaste groups like the Raidasis (Flood, 133). The major Vaisnava orders were:

| <b>CULT</b>  | <b>LOCATION</b>           | <b>TEACHER</b>             |
|--------------|---------------------------|----------------------------|
| SRI VAISNAVA | SRIRANGAM(TAMIL NADU)     | RAMANUJA                   |
| GAUDIYA      | BENGAL, ORISSA, VRINDAVAN | CAITANYA MAHAPRABHU        |
| VITHOBA      | PANDHARPUR (MAHARASHTRA)  | JNANESWAR, NAMDEV, JANABAI |
| RAMANANDI    | AYODHYA, JANAKPUR         | RAMANAND                   |
| NIRGUN SANTS | NORTHERN INDIA            | KABIR, NANAK               |

### GEOGRAPHICAL PROLIFERATION OF BHAKTI

Bhakti in India traces its roots to the 'Bhagavad Gita' where Krishna tells Arjuna, 'bhava madbhakto.'

There are two theories in India on the origin of Bhakti. Acharya Ramachandra Shukla claims a foreign, albeit Islamic origin for Bhakti. The Kabir scholar Hazariprasad Dwivedi says that

Bhakti originated in India itself. The native thesis posits that Bhakti originated in Tamil Nadu in South India (which contained parts of Kerala) where it was a form of non-utilitarian devotion, and then it travelled to other parts of India. Bhakti was not a form of reward-seeking worship, but devotion for its own sake. According to the Sanskrit text, 'Bhaktapurana,' Bhakti traversed the stages of a maturing young girl, originating in Tamil Nadu and attaining puberty in Maharashtra and attaining womanhood in the North of India.

Ritually, Bhakti deviated from Agami rites in its lack of insistence on purity. In Bhakti, Shiva can be presented with raw meat and Rama can be fed fruit by a tribal person.

The 'Bhagavata Mahatmya', 1.48-50, has a reply from a damsel to Narada on herself:

I was born in Dravida,  
Grew mature in Karnataka,  
Went here and there in Maharastra,  
Then in Gujarat I became old and worn  
...For long I went about in weakened condition...  
But on reaching Vrindavan I was renewed... (Hawley, The Bhagavata Mahatmya, 81-100)

Bhakti is an imperium of song, traversing all the coordinates on the map. Hence it would be worthwhile to study it in geographical divisions. Bhakti was not a movement per se, but a sociality. It could be called a network and had a cartography of flows and movements. This could be broadly classified as the South, North, and West. In the vortices of this flow from south to west to north was created a new rasa called bhakti rasa. According to Aditya Behl, the anchoring of devotional feelings was achieved through the use in bhakti contexts of Sanskrit theories of bhava and rasa.

In a historical sense, the Sufi use of bhava and rasa allows us to add specificity to the genealogical statement of legitimation found in texts like the 'Bhagavata Mahatmya', that bhakti was born in the South, grew old in Gujarat and Maharashtra, had her limbs 'riven by schismatics', and was then reborn as a beautiful young woman in Vrindavan in the 16th century. (Behl, 296).

## **Bhakti in the West:**

In Maharashtra, bhakti took on an anti-Brahmanical hue, especially in the works of the Varkaris starting in the 13<sup>th</sup> century.

The bhakti movement was a questioning of the orthodox and repressive Brahmanical understanding of Hinduism and as such made it possible for the lower castes and women to give a form to their religious aspirations, emphasising devotion and love, not knowledge as a means of salvation. In a newfound burst of confidence it located the bhakti marg, the way of devotion in the pursuit of salvation. (Mokashi-Punekar, xii)

Chokhamela, a Varkari poet was concerned with the devotion to the deity running contrary to his own lower caste status. The parallax between devotion and untouchability was a goldmine for the Varkari poet. He dissimulated the polemic in his joyous worship of Vithoba. In Chokhamela's works, anger and indignation were transmuted into love and devotion. This dichotomy formed the basis for Varkari movement. Most of them were commoners. They were:

Jnaneshwar (non-conformist Brahmin), Changdev (monk), Namdev (tailor), Gora (potter), Savata (gardener), Janabai (servant), Joga (oilman), Narahari (goldsmith), Sena (barber), Kanhopatra (courtesan). The greatest of them was perhaps Tukaram, a lowly peasant. Not only are they involved in labour, but the deity, Vithoba as well is participant in their exertions. God is a compatriot, lover, parent etc.

If to quote AK Ramanujan, in bhakti poetry men are like women before god (Ramanujan, AK. 'On Woman Saints' in Hawley and Wulff (ed.) *The Divine Goddess: Radha and the Goddesses of India*. Berkeley Religious Studies: Berkeley. 1982. p 316.), in Varkari poetry, not only is the poet a woman before god, but god himself is a loving, endlessly giving mother, who like his mortal counterpart has little control over the injustices and cruelties of the patriarchal family. Divinity becomes a powerless feminine principle thus turning traditional hierarchy topsy-turvy. (Mokashi-Punekar, xii, xx)

Ironically, as Irawati Karve says in her account of a Varkari pilgrimage, the presentday followers of Chokhamela and Varkaris sometimes do follow regimented dining practices. They must have elided the revolt in favour of the devotional.

The saviour of his devotees  
Who never turns away;  
Hurries to help them with their chores  
He dusts and cleans, and fetches water  
The upholder of dharma;  
Saves from the searing flames of nirvana.  
He keeps the cows at the milkman's house  
And happily with others  
Breaks the pot of curds.  
He pulled a wall for  
Dhyaneswar; made Changdev  
Famous; weeded the beds  
For Saavata the gardener,  
And fired pots for Gora.  
He loves more than his own self  
Goldsmith, cobbler and Namdev the tailor.  
He grinds the grain  
At Jani's home, sweeps the dirt  
And brings the cow dung in.  
Says Chokha, he is so tender;  
His devotees know him  
As a fond mother. (Chokhamela, 61)

Tukaram or the other Varkaris were not system builders or proponents of philosophical schools. From what is left of their work and cult, the Varkaris were men and women of immense courage and energy, who were pacifist in creed, yet often rebellious in thought.

Vithoba is probably a relic of Buddhist times; and Tuka's creed is in some ways a far off reflection of Buddhism. No one, however knew this less than he. (Fraser and Marather, 3-4)



## **Bhakti in the North:**

According to historian Romila Thapar, the Brahmana and Sramana traditions were locked in conflict like the proverbial snake and mongoose. The emergence of Bhakti cult in the 11<sup>th</sup> c CE had something to owe to Sramanic traditions. Fealty to the feudal lord was replaced by fealty to the deity.<sup>7</sup> The denunciation of the orthodox religious canon was not unequivocal. Pilgrimage to locations like Ayodhya, Mathura and the influx of Sufi ideals precipitated the advent of a broad-based bhakti commons in medieval Northern India. Geography and vernacular non-homogeneity as well as caste hierarchy halted the emergence of a bhakti religion. Bhakti as an emergent theology remained cultic and sect-oriented and fragmented, despite the organic credentials of being autochthonous which were attributed to it later.

Bhakti cults were confined to particular regions and were frequently unaware of their precursors or contemporaries elsewhere. Recourse to historicity of founder and practice was confined within the sect and was not required of a conglomeration of sects which later came to be called Hinduism. This is in part reflected in the use of the term sampradaya for a sect where the emphasis is on the transmission of traditional belief and usage through a line of teachers. (Thapar, 338).

Bhakti often took on martial colours in Northern India. Violence was not pathology. In fact saints like Kabir might have operated non-violently, but many were under the sway of martial leaders in academies or akharas in the 16<sup>th</sup> century CE.

This book began with a glimpse of one such dynastic lineage, the Kachwahas of Amer-Jaipur, who allied themselves after about 1500 with the Ramanandis of Galta. An important endpoint in this process is Warren Hastings' ban on wandering sanyasis and fakirs, the armed 'vagrants' whose raids into Bengal posed an implicit and explicit threat to the modernizing agrarian-revenue state the company was trying to create in the late 18th century. (Pinch, 196)

Thus, among the geographical regions of Bhakti, perhaps the inner richness creating a multitude of perspectives (parallax gap) was most evident in the North, where it was less philosophical and

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<sup>7</sup> According to Krishna Sharma, the Goan Marxist polymath DD. Kosambi was the first to establish a connection between bhakti and feudalism. Kosambi's critique of bhakti as medieval ideology will be dwelt upon in detail in chapter 4.

more mundane and open to contingent realities. The tensions between sagun and nirgun, and that between Sufism and Bhakti are more evident. The concept of avatar ran contrary to the nirgun ideal. Yet the Bhakti saints themselves were turned into incarnations of the deity. Kabir is the foremost name that comes to mind.

This tension is even more evident in the Puranas, where the Brahmin authors attempted to channel furrows of Advaita monism, stubbornly ignoring their basic incompatibility. (The philosopher Ramanuja tackled the problem in a far more sophisticated way; though the Puranas do not quote him as much as they quote a kind of third-rate version of Shankara, Puranic thought owes much to Ramanuja's resolution of saguna with nirguna.) (Doniger, 152-153)

According to KA Nilakanta Sastri, 'the bhakti cult had its origin in the north.' (Sastri, 35). Northern bhakti was mostly associated with Krishna. Krishna, appears in the canonical texts as early as the 7<sup>th</sup> c BCE. Krishna appears in the Chhandogya Upanishad which was composed in the 7<sup>th</sup> c BCE. The apotheosis of Krishna happened over the course of time. In the Gita, Krishna emerges as the Lord.

For Sastri, Krishna could have been a warrior-diplomat, known for sagacity and valour. Angiras was his Guru or teacher. The allegory of Krishna's annihilation of Kamsa could have acquired historical hues. The demon slayer is the heroic figure par excellence. Angiras, the guru figure was a sun-worshipper, and so must have been early Krishna Bhakti. Patanjali in his exegesis 'Mahabhasya' mentions followers of Vasudeva or Krishna. We can surmise from these that the Krishna cult was on the rise in the North.

The link between the rise of Bhakti in the North and that of the Southern parts of India is not evident. According to Sastri, it was the Southern movement that was inspired by the North.

They have also left a considerable body of legendary history purporting to narrate the life histories of the saints and gathered together in canonical collections by their followers of a later age, say about the 12th or 13th century AD. As already noted, this hagiology is replete with the sense of a great sense of danger to the orthodox faiths from the spread of the heretical creeds of Buddhism and Jainism. These creeds offended the 'Hindu sense of religious decency in two ways; they denied the authority of the revealed word, the Veda;

they also denied God; Buddhism denied the existence of the soul also, though in this respect Jainism parted company with it. These creeds had come into the Tamil country well before the Christian era and had more or less peacefully co-existed with the orthodox religious faiths and practices for a number of centuries. (Sastri, 35).

Northern Indian Bhakti is synonymous with the 'three voices' according to John Stratton Hawley – Kabir, Surdas and Mirabai. In the northern parts of India, the influence of Bhakti was also inflected with Sufism. It existed in varied forms in the Gangetic plain and the Punjab. The *Madhumalati* for example speaks of the story of the princess Madhumalati and a prince called Manohar. It was composed by a Sufi poet Manjhan in 1545 CE. There is a poetic legerdemain at work here which deliberately mixes up devotion and romance, as well as the divine and the human.

Malik Muhammad Jayasi, a Muslim poet, famously composed a major text of Krishna Bhakti, viz. the *Padmavat*.

With vivid images and feeling for the devotional attitudes connected with Krishna bhakti, Jayasi depicts the love of the gopis for the incarnated God, his marriage with Rukmini and Candravali, the spring festivals which the Gods attend, and many other elements from popular Vaishnava devotion. (De Bruijn, 60).

De Bruijn also suggests that there are descriptions of mutual antagonisms in panegyrics of Muslim saints. This shows that all was not hunky-dory, as it is suggested between the Bhakti and Sufi religions and their followers during the medieval period.

God, giver of love, the treasure-house of joy  
Creator of the two worlds in the one sound Om,  
My mind has no light worthy of you,  
With which to sing your praise, O Lord!  
King of the three worlds and the four ages,  
The world glorifies you from beginning to end. (Manjhan, 4)

The concepts of *ashiq-mashuq* is dominant in the love stories such as those of Sasi-Pannu, Heer-Ranjha etc. The beloved is both a likeness and extension of the deity. The core of this approach is non-duality, between I and Thou. Time and memory are intensified to reach a primordial point

of origin where man and woman were one, undifferentiated whole being. There is a sense of the sahaja or 'spontaneous non-duality' which operates under the sign of unitary harmony. Transcendence is achieved in immanence, a sense of being inside, which incidentally is a significant trope in Tamil Sangam poetry.<sup>8</sup>

You are the world, I am your wave.  
You are the sun, I the ray that lights the world.  
Do not think that you and I are separate:  
I am the body, you are my dear life.  
Who can part us, a single light in two forms?  
I see everything through the eyes of enlightenment.  
Who knows how long we have known each other?  
Today, O maiden, you do not recognize me.  
Think back in your memory-  
We knew each other on creation's first day. (Manjhan, 50)

Kabir was a poet of the nirgun. In the late 15<sup>th</sup> and early 16<sup>th</sup> centuries in northern India, sahaja (autochthonous) unity with the Lord Ram was celebrated in its nirgun and sagun variations. The deity turns into a totemic figure where the transcendent coalesces with the immanent. The doctrine of 'tawhid' or oneness of the deity made the Sufis gravitate towards the sahaja. But the Sufi mystical poetry encapsulated the paradox wherein the deity and devotee are one, yet the primacy and radical difference of the deity are absolute and unquestionable. Manjhan, who composed 'Madhumalati', is skeptical of the efficacy of language, since it is articulated by human beings. Only the divine word counts. As he points out, 'if words arise from mortal mouths, then how can the word be imperishable?' (Behl and Weightman, Introduction, to Manjhan, xxix-xxx)

This dilemma is reconciled in language, where the deity meets the devotee. Poetry is immortal. The poet becomes divine through his/her craft. It is eternally alive in the soul. The poet is trapped in a primordial Oedipal conflict against the deity, language playing a maternal function of birth.

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<sup>8</sup> Ullurai or the inner resonance.

The story of Prahlad occurs in texts belonging to the nirguni tradition such as the Kabir-bijak, Guru Granth Sahib, and Jan Gopal's Prahlad Charitra as well as narratives of saguni tradition like the Bhagavata-Purana. David Lorenzen calls Prahlad, the Indian Oedipus. Prahlad's mother seems insignificant, in what essentially is a tussle between the 'bad father' Hiranyakashipu and the 'good father' Lord Vishnu.

If there is indeed an Indian Oedipus, Prahlad clearly has a strong claim to be he. It should be noted however that Prahlad's mother plays only a small role in the story...Prahlad's only true love seems to be for Vishnu, the good father figure. There is also an interesting duplication of the bad father/good father roles of Hiranyakasipu and Vishnu in the figures of Indra (who wants to kill him) and Narada (who saves him). (Lorenzen, 24-25)

According to Lorenzen, Prahlad, though it is rarely stated explicitly, can be equated with the castes that come lower in the varna hierarchy. This is the intention<sup>9</sup> of the authors of the 'Bhagavatha Purana' and the 'Prahlada Charitra' for Lorenzen. It is not an allegorical critique of society, but a direct and impactful one. The demon society of which Hiranyakasipu (who and his sons including Prahlad are presumably Kshatriyas) is king, also has varna divisions. Prahlad's teacher is a Brahmin (Sukra). Prahlad in 'Prahlada Charitra' is a victim whom the lower castes are invited to identify with.

It is also significant however that Prahlad's immediate enemies and oppressors, the villains of the story, are identified as his Brahmin teachers and his own royal father. The demon Brahmins and kings represent human Brahmins and kings in their more disagreeable personae, those who unjustly appropriate an unjustified share of the status, wealth and power of society. (Lorenzen, 27)

Jan Gopal's 'Prahlad Charithra' depicts a God without form, limits, qualities, boundaries, support, shadow, image, bodily orifices, companion or home. Nirgun attitudes towards caste are generally more antagonistic. But they do not directly contradict the Veda, but strive to draw their very legitimacy from the Vedic corpus. Both nirgun and sagun bhakti adopted universal philosophical attitudes and shed hierarchies. Compared to philosophical schools such as the

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<sup>9</sup> Intention is crucial in the Oedipus story as he did not intend to kill his father or have conjugal relations with his mother. Hence for Sophocles, he can be absolved.

advaita and mimasa, sagun bhakti was anti-caste, especially the proponents of Vishishtadvaita. Due to the geographical spread and sprawl of sagun bhakti, attitudes towards caste also varied.

The apotheosis of the human happens in devotion (bhakti) and not by birth. Shudras and women can be exalted in their devotion, as Lord Krishna mentions in the Bhagavat Gita: ‘Those who take refuge in me, Arjuna, even those who have had sinful birth as women, Vaishyas and Shudras, will reach the supreme goal’(9,32).

No bottom no constraint, say all the saints.

No limit no defeat, say all traditions.

No end no number, say all the saints.

Unplumbed and unfathomed, they call you unreachable.

Unseen and invisible, say the gods

Undivided and uncut, say all the Veda.

No boundary and no support, they call you formless.

No movement no weight, they call you priceless.

No duality no fear, say the songs of praise.

No chant no image, they call you measureless.

No body no opening, they call you homeless.

No limbs no companion, unbroken, unbroken. (Jan Gopal, quoted in Lorenzen, 30).

Divinity of the human, despite hierarchy is projected in Bhakti through the Avatar. The Avatar is human yet divine. This happens in Surdas and Tulsidas, sagun bhakti poets. Humans are aware of their divinity, being an Avatar. <sup>10</sup>Even here there is a prioritization of the spirit over the body. The body still remains contaminated and something to be shed off, the mortal coil.

It is thus in a mystic sense that the Avatars are the Avatars of God. When later poets like Tulsidas, Surdas and others who went even before them take them as actually special cases of God’s taking the human form, and make them endowed with a consciousness of their Avatarhood, the real significance of the theory is lost and it becomes vulnerable. (Barthwal, 66)

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<sup>10</sup> The Virashaivas in Karnataka did carry the linga on their persons, thus consecrating the human body, within which the divine spirit dwelt.

According to Barthwal, for the Nirguns, like Kabir, god occurred between speech and silence. Unlike the human, the divine is sublime: “what you speak of Him, that He is not. He is what He is.” (Barthwal, 25). Thus nirgun bhakti elevates the divine beyond the human, so much so that it becomes impossible to attain, yet attainable. Yet in sagun, the symbolized, depicted, sculpted, anthropomorphized divine has human dimensions, that are easier to attain. The Samkhya distinction between purusha and prakrti as well as the triad of sattva (the norm), tamas (abnormal) and rajas (mean) and the five elements of air, water, earth, sky and fire are encapsulated in nirgun bhakti. There are also the 25 evolutes and 5 sense organs.

Sundardas when he discourses on the creation of the Universe, warns his disciples not to take them as real. They are false illusions, he says. Kabir also says, ‘there is no universe, no matter, not even the five elements,’ ‘no mind, no body, not the three strands.’ (Barthwal, 44)

Sagun bhakti had intensity of fervor and devotion that drew pilgrims and made sites like Vrindavan and Mathura, associated with Krishna worship, into major pilgrimage centres as well as spaces for the efflorescence of a bhakti idiom that was sagun in character. Nirgun bhakti of course lacked such a spatial centralization. They were all carrying the god within that ironically splintered the nirgun bhakti into multiple voices.

By the middle of the 16th century a number of important Braj poets can be traced to the bhakti centres of Vrindavan and Mathura, all connected to new forms of Krishna worship that were coalescing in the region as part of an intense effort on the part of devout communities to reclaim Vaishnava heritage sites. (Busch, 26-27).

Revelation was central to sagun bhakti as well. The ‘Ramacandracandrika’ was thus composed by Keshavdas. It was revealed to him after sage Valmiki appeared to him in a dream. The revelation is both sacred and secular, because of its human nature, mediated by sleep, which is a mystical state of consciousness. It was a moment of what Allison Busch would call ‘vernacular inauguration.’ The revelatory nature of the verse, whatever be the truth of the claims, sacralized the vernacular. Imagistic nature of sagun bhakti made it conducive to such revelation.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Imagistic nature of sagun bhakti made it conducive to such revelatory claims in the public reception.

The events described also constitute an almost classic topos of vernacular inauguration, with Keshavdas's Braj Ramayana being authorized by the premier poet of the Sanskrit tradition. One adi kavi (first poet) passes the baton to another. (Busch, 44)

The vernacular idiom was refreshing and novel and less dogmatic and hence more accessible. The nirgun poet Kabir likens the vernacular Hindi language to a river which is in flow, whereas the majestic gravity of Sanskrit was overpowering or slightly forbidding, like the water of a well. (sanskrita kupajala, bhakha bahata nira). Thus nirgun as well as sagun bhakti poets opposed caste hierarchies, while promoting the use of vernacular language. This led to the popularization and immense complexity of the bhakti movement in northern India.

Unlike in Southern India, there was a profusion of genres and forms such as dohas and kathas and literary publics in 15<sup>th</sup> century Northern India. Francesca Orsini calls this 'Bhakti public sphere.' Singers and lyricists enjoyed high social status.

Kathas, songs and dohas were genres practised by a range of different poets-Naths, Sants, Sufis, Jains, Bhakha, and also sometimes Persian court poets-and the high degree of intertextuality in their titles, tropes and images shows that they circulated in all these domains. Literary genres were thus a palimpsest on which every poet wrote from his particular perspective. (Orsini and Sheikh, 14-15).

### **Bhakti in the South:**

In the poetry of the Tamil Vaishnavite saint Andal, a merging of two major currents of Indian life, the Aryan and the Dravidian can be found. In the *Cilappathikaram* Krishna as a deity makes his first appearance in Tamil. The entire eco-system of 'Vrindavan' is transposed to Tamil Nadu in this work by Ilango Adigal. Krishna wields the spear of the 'vel' which is the weapon of choice for the predominantly Tamil deity, 'Murugan.' The 'Vrindavan' turns into a Vaishnavite Utopia. Krishna also turns into a player of drums rather than the flute.

In the 'Tiruppavai', the pre-Bhakti ritual of 'Paavai' is transformed into a Vaishnavite Bhakti ritual. The 'Tiruppavai' has eloquent evocations of the rains and here it merges Krishna with Indra, the deity often associated with rain. The poem spatially reaches for poetic depths as well as for the mystical cosmic altitude. Water dominates the South Indian imagination since the



fields were rain fed in the absence of a full-fledged irrigation system or river network<sup>12</sup>, whereas the Aryan imagination was more fiery and paid obeisance to fire or agni. Bhakti thus was not a complete repudiation of ritual.

There are also exclusive references to musical instruments in medieval Bhakti poetry, especially the use of drums, cymbals and other percussion instruments. These references are now more fully understandable in terms of the soteriological function of ritual music. (Beck, 139)

The pre-Bhakti, Sangam elements of ancient Tamil poetry made its way into Bhakti poetry. Sangam poetry had the binary of akam and puram (inside and outside) evoking love and war. These two streams came together in Bhakti poetry. Saivite Bhakti also contains grotesque elements like the aura of cremation grounds (the Tamil terms for both forest and cremation ground is the same - 'kadu').

Bhakti poetry could belong either to the margi(classical/great) tradition or the desi (folk/little) tradition. It could also constitute a separate genre of its own. AK. Ramanujan suggests that Bhakti comprised not a synthesis of 'margi' and 'desi' traditions. Rather, he suggests that, Bhakti comprised an anti-establishment to the 'establishment' of 'little' and 'great' (Ramanujan, 34).

Bhakti in the Southern part of India, where it took roots, was philosophical and popular in its aspirations. It combined the ethereal doctrines of Advaita and the ethics of a work culture. The immense beauty, devotional intensity and simplicity of the Kannada and Tamil and Malayalam verses made them popular. They also attempted in their texts a repudiation of hierarchical structures, which often had larger repercussions as in the Virashaiva movement in Karnataka.

Vernacular bhakti is no less crafter, and often no less learned, than the great Kavya masterpieces. (Shulman, 103).

Bhakti was not the organic edifice which it appears to be in hindsight. Not all the Vachanakaras were branches of the same tree or rivers flowing into the same ocean, nor were they all bent upon caste or social reform. For the Kannada scholar Nagaraj, the odd one out is Allama Prabhu; Akka Mahadevi and Basavanna being proponents of 'old-fashioned' conventional Bhakti. Allama's

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<sup>12</sup> Even today there is clamour for river-interlinking and the feud over sharing of Kaveri river waters seems to be an everlasting one.

verses had that elusive esoteric quality and they were syncretic in a way that would have appalled Surendra Nath Dasgupta. But both Allama and Basavanna find common ground in devotional symbolism and reformist zeal.

From the time of King Bhoja (11<sup>th</sup> c CE), who composed the *Srngaraprakash* srngara was the rasa that was used to express devotional mystical experiences and ecstasy since bhakti as a rasa had not emerged or garnered the heft it later did. It was against this structural deficiency that Allama rebelled in his verse.

The elders went to the pond on the Hill  
With the onion of the Absolute  
They are trying to make a curry  
The Hill cannot boil,  
The curry cannot be cooked,  
And hence there can be no offering. (Allama Prabhu, Allama Vachana Chandrike)

The metaphor of the onion stands for the sensual order of rasa theory. The hill of course is Saivite and the allusions are elliptical. Allama also later alludes to poets as ‘parrots’ repeating verses learned by rote, without registering their meaning, worth or sense.

The Kashmiri Saiva school, as interpreted by Abhinavagupta, offers a critique of the metaphysics of memory and ‘recognition’, the theory of pratyabhijnana, and Allama refutes it by scrutinizing its implications on two levels, spiritual and aesthetic. At the same time, the political implications of Allama’s critique of srngara bhakti and its basis in rasa theory are far-reaching; they add a new dimension to the radical energies of the Virasaiva movement. (Nagaraj, 85)

For the Vacanakaras, nothing, not even the Upanishads were deemed worthwhile but for their philosophical and devotional intensity. The Vacanakaras abandoned complex forms such as the champu for folk modes of expression. Nagaraj movingly speaks of a ‘Virashaiva memory’ which has kept alive a novel idiom of creative production that departed from a non-devotional mode of writing to a more comprehensive and organic one that also included the devotional mode within its ambit. The Vacanas were in conflict with the monarchy and monastical clergy. The popularization of their philosophy was an unfinished project, hints of which can be gleaned from the scholarly opus of Nagaraj.

When Siddharama (12<sup>th</sup> c CE) describes language as impotent, he is really speaking for the majority of vacanakaras of his time. But his profound doubt does not discourage them from exploring the resources that language has at its command. Allama ascribes to human language a basic quality: its ability to narrate. If contemporary Western language theory reflects on language's fundamental metaphoricity, Allama focuses on another equally important trait: the narrative instinct. The vacanakaras' distrust of formal rhetoric was also quite deep seated. It was a rejection of both the context and texts that the previous, or dominant, literary culture had produced. This only shows that the major poets of the movement were aware of the pedagogical training that goes into the making of poetry; they simply chose not to write in those modes. (Nagaraj, 90)

The soul of bhakti was its simplicity, which through lyrical modes proliferated spatially and temporally in the South. Southern Bhakti verses, such as those of Basavanna are known for their simplicity, and yet he was not averse to the occasional polemical argument, often acquiring the tone of a politician prophet. This is crucial since the Virasaivas regarded the Tamil Saivas or the Nayanmars as their predecessors. Some features are discernible in Tamil Bhakti poetry as well. Perhaps due to the class composition of his following, Basavanna was a proponent of a distinctly spiritual work ethic which called work, worship (Kayakave Kailasa). He also was less dogmatic. What Kabir was to Northern Bhakti, Basava was for the Southern version. Basavanna fundamentally altered the way religion, labour and deity were perceived in Southern India.

Basava, with his zest of a social reformer and the zeal of a prophet, caught in the net of practical politics, was not a perfect being, but a man whose whole life was a struggle towards self-perfection. This struggle is strongly present in his poetry. But above all, there is a very characteristic mixture of harshness and tenderness: of almost rude assertiveness and extreme loving kindness. This makes him human, so near, so lovable. (Zvelebil, 3).

Due to the pervasive influence of advaita philosophy and later that of Visishtadvaita, Tamil Bhakti led its followers to a sense of union and identification with the deity. The transcendent was to meet the immanent, in Tamil Bhakti's textually created space, one that deftly maneuvered the exigencies of popular taste as well as imperial assent. In the universe of devotional poetical imagination, the poet was the overlord.

Devotionalism (bhakti) is more than the worship of God or Goddess as expressed in poems, songs or rites. The ardent bhakta (devotee) wants to possess God or Goddess and/or to be possessed by God or Goddess. It is thus not unusual to discover a devotee being labelled mad, an idiot, or a demon (someone possessed). In devotional Hinduism, God's or Goddess' oneness is stressed at the same time that his or her multiple natures are also emphasized. This suggests that the deity incarnates himself or herself often and in many different forms, in a continual process of revelation. (Olson, 152).

What later colonial-era paintings did to the visual conception of deity, the Bhakti verses performed analogous service to the literary conception of Gods. This according to Kamil Zvelebil was given form (bhavita) through the act of singing. This divinity-on-demand mode must have proved successful since it shaped the imagination of Southern Bhakti. In a drastic henotheistic step, God is ontologically willed into existence by the act of imagination, an idiom central to Tamil Bhakti verse.

If you say he exists, he does;  
His forms are these forms,  
If you say he does not,  
His formlessness  
Is of these non-forms.  
If he has the qualities  
Of existence and non-existence,  
He is in two states.  
He who pervades is without end. (Nammalvar, Tiruvaymoli 1.1.9))

The deity that is beyond your conceptions has to exist imperatively.<sup>13</sup> That deity is both nirgun and sagun, in which non-existence and existence coalesce as a result of the textual effect arising from the imaginative effort of the Bhakti poet.<sup>14</sup>

For existence and non-existence are themselves the very form of god, and whether you say he exists or he does not exist, he still exists. Even where he does not seem to be, he is the inner soul of everything and therefore, he exists. (Doniger, 151)

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<sup>13</sup> This is similar to Anselm of Canterbury and later Descartes' 'Ontological Proof for Existence of God.'

<sup>14</sup> Nammalvar here is essentially contradicting Buddhist negation.

What must it have felt like to be a Tamil Bhakta or devotee, to have inhabited its intimate inner space? From textual evidence, it could not have been all conflict free and pure and organic without grains of doubt and contradiction. The Tamil used often conveys metallic feelings of non-emulsified torment and struggle. “I am, a puppet made of iron” (Manikkavacakar, Tiruvacakam 5.22). Imagination remained a therapeutic device, that could offer solace as well as solutions to problems. It rendered complexity as simple, and translucent. Kamil Zvelebil claims that such sort of imagination was not mystical (elliptical or convoluted), but rather empirical and realistically direct (Zvelebil, 267). The Bhakti poets of Telugu, Tamil and Malayalam languages followed a tradition of yogic imagination that was corporeal in its contours.

Yogic meditative bhavana is a necessary precursor to the individualized forms of the imaginative faculty that together with other mental functions make up the new metapsychological matrix of late medieval Telugu, Tamil and Malayalam sources. (Zvelebil, 3)

In Kerala, it was under the reign of the Samoothiri of Calicut that a distinctive Malayali, culture and consciousness were forged. This shared similarities and thematic as well as temporal continuities with minor principalities of Tamil, Telugu and Kannada territories forged by soldiers of fortune. What has later been perceived as nationalistic consciousness in India must have arisen during this period.

Such self-made entrepreneurs, many from the margins of the social and geopolitical world, founded small-scale kingdoms-which we call Nayaka, after the warriors who comprised their institutional backbone-in the Tamil, Telugu and Kannada realms. In Kerala, something similar took place from the 15th century on in the so-called Zamorin state of Calicut, the first modern state on the Kerala coast and the arena for the first articulations of a distinctive self-conscious Malayalam cultural identity. Powerful thematic continuities bind together the Nayaka states of the south and east and the emergent state system of Malabar with its innovative poets and scholars; indeed, throughout South India we discern in this period the lineament of a fresh anthropology and the sometimes implicit sometimes explicit redefinition of what counts as human. (Zvelebil, 152)

For Champakalakshmi, it was not the texts per se, but the Tamil Hindu temple that was the focal point of Bhakti. The claim that the movement comprising Alvars and Nayanars were anti-Brahmanical also does not hold water since many of the poets themselves were Brahmins, and were not particularly interested in repudiating their privileges. So the radical aspect of Bhakti, though not to be denied, has to be taken with a pinch of salt. It was more temple-centric devotion than marketplace polemic. Bhakti superstructure in Tamil did not reflect its base, till later on, though poets like Tirunavukkarasu and Nammalvar give hints of dissent. It was hardly a radical reformist movement. The protest against orthodox Brahmanism was nuanced and difficult to grasp for the present day reader, without twisting the hymns themselves.

The anti-caste nuances in the Alvar hymns had a cascading effect that cumulatively resulted in the Srivaisnava philosopher Pillai Lokacarya, who lived in Srirangam in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, denouncing caste in unequivocal terms.

To think of a devotee in terms of caste (varna) is said to be a heinous act, comparable to examining the genitals of one's own mother; such a devotee becomes an outcaste (candala). (Pillai, L. 239).

The idea conveyed here by Pillai Lokacarya was more or less that of Ramanuja as well. Bhakti is love, an intuitive and organic devotion, unctuous and fluid.<sup>15</sup> Epistemologically, Bhakti derives from the acquisition of knowledge according to them, though this knowledge is devoid of caste connotations and that is significant, especially if one is looking to redeem medieval saints from caste prejudices.

In sum, with regard to the relationship between the means of salvation, karman is the auxiliary means of bhakti. Although the theories pertaining to the relationship between these means in the thoughts of Yamuna and Ramanuja are intricate. Pillai Lokacarya's belief is extremely simple and can be illustrated, as shown:

Karma->Jnana->Bhakti (Ishitobi, 79).

The luminescence of the hymns of Alvars and Nayanmars were refracted by the prism of time into various hues of brilliance, some of them emancipatory and polemical. It was the 13<sup>th</sup> century

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<sup>15</sup> In Malayalam, 'sneham' the common term for 'love' is a synonym for 'oil' and can in the literary context be used to mean oil.

panegyrics of saint poets like Tiruppanalvar that cast them in the role of anti-caste crusaders, for contemporary readers.

The songs sung by the Alvars (Vaisnavaite saint poets) and the Nayanmars (Saivaite saint poets) have several words which are capable of inciting riots. If Jayalalitha, who is in power today had ruled in those days, she would have imprisoned the Alvar and Nayanmar under the POTA. They chanted couplets containing such powerful violence-inciting words: 'O Perumal! Lend me your grace to cut off the heads of Sakyas!' Thodaradipodi Alvar has openly sung, 'Grant us grace to behead Sakyas and behead Jains in the streets.' (Thirumavalavan, 329).

According to R.Champakalakshmi, who has extensively studied the history of Medieval Southern India and of Tamil Nadu in particular, the idea of a personal deity, antagonism towards Brahmanism and opposition to Jainism and Buddhism are the major traits of Tamil Bhakti.

It is the second theme, namely protest against orthodox Brahmanism that needs to be examined from the point of view of the social base sought by the exponents of bhakti. Hints of the struggle between the Tamil hymnists and orthodox Vedic Brahmanas are found in the poetry of Nammalvar, Tontaratippoti, and Mathurakavi, and in the hagiography of the 12th to 13th centuries, as, for example, in the story of Tiruppanalvar. (Champakalakshmi, *From Devotion and Dissent to Dominance*, 55).

Whatever the anti-Brahmanical credentials of Bhakti in Tamil might be, what was not in question was its originary newness. Bhakti endeavored towards a more open and less conventionally oriented paradigm.

The bhakti movement in medieval Hinduism, as much as any other cultural element in medieval Indian society, textured and shaped the culture of the time. In its textual aspects, its devotional hymns and commentaries, the bhakti movement stands opposed to the restrictive structure of Hindu society that is expressed in the legal and social texts of the age. The central characteristic of the bhakti movement in textual terms is its openness, its universal appeal without regard to caste. (Stein, 84).

Preceding the Bhakti movement, there existed in Tamil, a strong Siddha tradition. This was an anti-hierarchical and individualistic strain of devotion. Sivavakkaiar, a Siddha is said to have repudiated temple-centric rituals. He exhorted to bath not in those temple ponds, but those within their minds. This is moving on so many levels since the temples were forbidden to outcastes for reasons of purity. The siddhars were said to have mastered esoteric meditation techniques and were popularly supposed to have magical powers. They denounced the chanting of spells or 'mandirams' and followed druidic lifestyles. They were the original Tamil humanists, who came from downtrodden castes and strove to replace social oppression with individual enlightenment.

Man is seen as the centre of all his actions and beliefs. They believed that the world is real, not illusory. There is no other universe than the human universe, where man determines his actions. Their radical endeavour demanded reason for every human action and stressed on the practicability of human beliefs. By laying the foundation for human self-realization, they developed a hope for social equality. Through self-realization and self-emancipation, a person shapes his own real world, where everyone is equal. The 'person' is a practical human who gives up his superstitions, his illusions and has gained reason instead. He is an able person who is capable of solving his own problems and who reveals his human nature. He is a self-deriving human who estranges from the desires of accumulation of wealth and possesses alternative values that are against the one that stands for separation of men from men. (Gunasekaran, 118-119)

There is a Bhakti parable of a hunter named Kannappa. He is often regarded as the earliest of the 63 Saivite bhakti saints, Nayanmars. He venerated the Siva linga at Kalahaasti temple with offerings of carnations and meat. Legend goes that once when one of the eyes of the deity started to bleed he replaced the bleeding eye with his own, and was about to do the same with the deity's second bleeding eye, when Siva himself stopped Kannappa from doing so and healed his eye in addition to exalting Kannappa in the pantheon of devotees. The crucial point not to be missed is that Kannappa was an outcaste hunter.

However, the recognition of the kuranci (mountainous region) as one of the five tinais in early Tamil literature suggests that the forest dwellers were already in the process of getting incorporated into the agrarian world and its belief system. Kannappa's mode of worship of Shiva broke all the rules of ritual purity prescribed by the agamas, when he



makes the ritual offering of raw meat, bathes the God from the water he has carried in his mouth and puts his sandal clad foot on the eyes of the linga to offer his eyes. The hagiographies portray the episode as if everything in the story happened according to the desire of Shiva, and this was to test and demonstrate the devotion of the hunter bhakta to the world. (Satyanath, 51)

According to David Shulman, Shiva Bhakti contains “a pervasive emotionalism in both tone and substance.” (Shulman, 1990, xxii).

It would be deemed controversial to say that even the saliva could be deemed Prasada, or divine offering. Satyanath also interrogates the idea of the prasada. Between conjugal partners it is permissible to pass bodily fluid as it is with one’s mother. The practice of consuming leftover is still practiced. Prasada is often god’s saliva fluid. The other arena where this happens is that of the family. The family relations like mother-child, husband-wife are wildly popular tropes in Bhakti poetry to connote the Deity-devotee relationship. In the case of Kannappa, the hunter-devotee, he offers the water filling his oral cavity, which must contain his saliva fluid, as prasada.

As Kannappa’s mode of worship reverses the direction of flow of body fluids-the flowers that he had tucked into his hair is offered to God, water contaminated by Kannappa’s mouth is sprinkled on God’s body, his partly eaten meat is offered to the god-it creates an inverse world order and threatens the order that prevailed within the orthodoxy. Such reversal create a prailoma system, an inverse world order, which, in turn, creates and defines new types of interpersonal relationships in a society or sectarian community. (Satyanath, 57)

The Czech scholar and linguist Kamil Zvelebil advocates a fourfold schema for the study of Bhakti, which are: historical-sociological study, synchronic-segmental literary analysis, comparative approach vis-à-vis other varieties of mysticisms, structuralist study of bhakti as sheer poetry (Zvelebil, 187). Bhakti was thus a fertile lode of literary creativity that interlinked various streams of religious thought and performative practices throughout medieval India.



Map1. The Bhakti Map of India. (Outline courtesy of d-maps.com free maps.)

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### CHAPTER 3: BHAKTI IN MALAYALAM

The Bhakti movement of Ramanuja, Nimbarka, Madhava, Ramananda, Vallabhacharya, Chaitanya, Nam Dev, Kabir and Guru Nanak had very little impact on Kerala.... The problem of reconciliation between Hinduism and Islam also did not arise seriously in Kerala in that period. Contact with outside ceased to exist in the age of Chola Imperialistic wars. A line of saints, between 13th c. and 17th c. propagated, Krishna Cult. Whether it can be characterised as a Bhakti movement is doubtful. It had no political and social background. Most of these saints were devotees of Srikrishna of Guruvayur. The earliest of them was Bilvamangalam alias Krsna Lilasuka (1251-1350 CE). (Nambudiri, 160)

Poets, singers and saints from Kerala are conspicuous by their absence from the pantheon of pan-Indian Bhakti. This has more to do with exigencies of national integration than with reality.<sup>1</sup> The 16<sup>th</sup> century poet from Malabar, Poonthanam Namboodiri is the poet who is often anthologized as part of Indian poetry, due to the distinctly recognizable hallmark of his Bhakti. Ezhuthachan, the preceptor of Malayalam literature and Cherusseri, a poet of immense lyrical and erotic felicity are often given the short shrift<sup>2</sup>. This chapter focuses on these three poets.

According to PP Narayanan Nambudiri, there was no Bhakti Movement (similar to Northern India) worth speaking of in Kerala and it was rather a Bhakti cult that took root and proliferated in Kerala. Bilvamangalam Swamy wrote the 'Srikrishna Karnamrtha' and made the concept of Vishnu as Balakrishna or Unnikrishnan (infant Krishna) a feature of the popular Krishna cult in Kerala, with the Guruvayoor Temple as its centre. (Nambudiri, 157) Thus a Bhakti Cult took root in Kerala. (The origin of the 'Bhakti Cult', Nambudiri traces back to, Mother Goddess and Siva cults of the Indus Valley. The reason for the 'Bhakti Cult' of Kerala not being called a 'movement' could also be the use of the timid-sounding 'prasthanam' (movement) in Malayalam literary history, instead of a more robust word like the Hindi 'andolan' with its connotations of social change.)

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<sup>1</sup> According to John Hawley, it was V.Raghavan's broadcasts over All India Radio of his Patel lectures that paved the way to the present-day acceptance of the existence of a medieval pan-Indian bhakti. Thus India as a state also becomes an imperium of song. Hawley, John Stratton. *A Storm of Songs: India and the Idea of Bhakti Movement*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. 2015. p. 20.

<sup>2</sup> *These My Words: The Penguin Book of Indian Poetry* edited by Eunice De Souza and Melanie Silgado includes an excerpt from 'Adhyatmaramayanam' by Ezhuthachan.

Bhakti first proliferated in Kerala in the form of folk songs. Songs preceded the development of dialects. In this manner the folk songs on Bhakti preceded the evolution of Malayalam language. Many of the early folk songs were in praise of various deities. In the 'pattuprasthanam' or song movement in Malayalam, songs in praise of Rama and songs in praise of Krishna were the most popular.

Kulasekhara Alvar, the 8<sup>th</sup> century Chera ruler and poet of Vaishnava bhakti, composed the 'Mukundamala' and 'Perumal Tirumozhi' which have been anthologized as part of the Vaishnavite Bhakti canon in the compendium called 'Nalayira Divya Prabandham' compiled by Nathamuni between 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries. He is sometimes said to have been born in Kerala, yet the sources point otherwise, as Bharati Jagannathan says, 'there is an attempt to place Kulasekhara Alvar based on the assumption that he was a crowned King of Kerala. However our evidence does not permit this confidence as none of the above sites can be reliably placed in Kerala; they seem to be located around Madurai and Uraiyur.' (Jagannathan, 139)

PP Narayanan Nambudiri says with reference to early Bhakti movement in Southern India that, 'among the 62 Nayinars and 12 Alvars, Kerala produced only four, three Nayinars and one Alvar, namely Cheraman Perumal Nayinar, Viralminta Nayinar, Arivatta Nayinar and Kulasekhara Alvar. People worshipped both in Siva and Vishnu temples. Division of brahmins into Saiva and Vaishnava was practically unheard of in Kerala.' (Nambudiri, 159)

The 12<sup>th</sup> century poet Cheeraman who wrote the 'Ramacharitham' is among the earliest to attempt literary composition in Malayalam, though it was heavily influenced by Tamil, and also by Sanskrit. Cheeraman is surmised by many to have been a king of the Venad ruling family, and by yet others to have been a commoner from a deprived background. In this work 'Ramacharitham', the poet tries to create dharmic awareness through Rama, an incarnation of Vishnu. A segment of Ramayana has been interpreted by Cheeraman supposedly 'to enlighten those little folks on earth' by the poet Cheeraman. 'To enlighten those little folks on earth,' is perhaps Cheeraman's most popular line and has come to serve as a motto for later writers in Malayalam.

### **Ramacharitham: The First Blooming**

'Ramacharitham' was written in the 'pattu' or song format. In fact, the first among the works in the 'Pattu movement' in Malayalam was Ramacharitham by Cheeraman. It is often considered

the very first work of Malayalam Bhakti movement, which was preceded by the 'Pattu' Movement or the 'pattuprasthana'. It was written in the 12th century, probably in northern Kerala and was based on Valmiki Ramayana and also the 'Kamba Ramayana'. It only deals with the Yudha Kanda.

The 'Ramacharitam' has 164 segments of 1814 stanzas composed in the 'pattu' format. Though the major focus of the poem is on the valorous 'Yudha Kanda' of the Ramayana, Bhakti has also been given importance. Though the intention of the poet is not the propagation of Bhakti, it is beyond doubt that the poet has been influenced by Bhakti. This is a work that also illuminates the veera rasa. Alongside, the poet illustrates various dimensions of Bhakti. Cheeraman's 'Ramacharitam' is an instance of the medieval model of Vaishnavite Bhakti being replicated all over India. Diverging from the source, in the coronation segment, a lengthy panegyric of Vishnu by the sage Narada has been added. The 'Adityahridaya' segment of 'Ramacharitham' is lengthier than in the original. Rama is an incarnation of Vishnu according to this work. Also can be found in this work is the lamentation of Ravana's sister Mandodari on his death and also her praise of the incarnation that is Rama.

Many instances in the poem vouch that the poet was a devotee of Vishnu. Many lines in the poem signify the Vaishnavite predilections of the poet. In the matters of Bhakti, Cheeraman was a precursor to Ezhuthachan. For positing Rama as an incarnation of Vishnu, the poet depended on the Kamba Ramayana. Evenwhile stressing on Veera rasa, the poet also tries to boost Bhakti. 'O lotus-eyed God,/reposing on the breasts of the flower-born Lakshmi/lovely in her luxuriant flower-decked hair/thous, the essence of serene wisdom,/rarest to be revealed.' (Cheeraman, 125). The eyes of the Lord Vishnu reposing with his spouse Lakshmi are described anamorphically in the Lacanian sense. According to Žižek, there is an awry gaze that reveals different perspective which doesn't coincide with the empty serene gaze. The infinitesimal torsion between these two gazes, separates us from psychosis. (Žižek, Looking Awry) The serenity derives from the gaze. He rests on Lakshmi, his spouse's bosom. There are two kinds of mothers in Indian mythology, according to AK Ramanujan-the the tooth mother and the breast mother. The sustainer of the worlds Lord Vishnu, rests on the breasts of his consort goddess Lakshmi.

The breasts are organs of fragility as well as subtlety. Like the male gonads, they occur in pairs and also produce life-sustaining fluid. ‘When Abhirami Bhattar gives us the striking image of the Devi’s breasts searing Shiva’s chest...we are reminded in one stroke that fragility is not without power, subtlety is not without strength.’ (Subramaniam, xxiv) (It has to be noted that it is the gaze that is gendered here and not the body as such).

The ‘Ramacharitam’ of Cheeraman is the first instance of an intense outpouring of literary devotionalism in Malayalam. The language used by Cheeraman is closer to Tamil. He also self-consciously includes a reference to the Tamil Vaishnava poet Nammalvar. ‘May I be blessed with the gift of genius/by Valmiki, the first of poets,/then Vyasa, the good Agastya, scholar in the Vedas,/and the sage who composed honey-sweet verses in Tamil.’ (Subramaniam, xxiv) The sage who composed the mellifluous lines is supposed to have been none other than Nammalvar himself. There existed a loosely held sense of a networked sociality of Bhakti that encompassed multiple voices and beings. A pan-Indian fraternity was being forged to form a ‘commonwealth of love’. (See Hawley, A Storm of Songs)

The book starts with verses praising Vishnu along with Ganapathi, Saraswathi, Siva, Parvathy, Lakshmi. The poet prays to Parameswara to grant him the boon to praise Mahavishnu who incarnated as Rama and defeated Ravana. There is a panegyric that is intense with Bhakti, during the instance where Vibhishana compels Rama to give Sita to Ravana.

Malayalam literary history is replete with ‘movements’ from the ‘pattu’ (song) movement to the bhakti movement. But John Hawley would argue that medieval bhakti was a network rather than a movement (though he might be mistaking the term ‘andolan’ for the English equivalent of ‘movement’). (Hawley, A Storm of Songs, 20)

It is interesting to note that the character of Ravana is given some importance in ‘Ramacharitam’ which essentially is the ‘history of Rama’. The bewailing Mandodari and other women of Ravana’s harem and Lanka are sympathetically presented, thus giving Ravana the aura of being a ‘prajavatsala’ (beloved by subjects) ruler.

The ten heads appeared as peaks of Mount Meru,  
Some of the women caressed one face on their laps,  
Some others another face;



They bathed the heroic faces in a flood of tears.  
Some fell across and fondled the faces again and again,  
Embraced the body bewailing  
And went on recounting one by one  
His heroic deeds of yesteryears.  
They stroked their bedecked breasts and faces,  
Fell around him, their melting hearts ablaze,  
Started recalling amidst wailing  
How he conquered the fourteen worlds,  
How in fierce fight the blood of enemy warriors  
Adorned the victorious hero's bosom.  
O Lord of Lanka! You shattered enemies as the sun the darkness  
You were the source of strength for all;  
You were the tree of paradise to solicitous  
Who is here to protect us and this orphaned land?  
Why did you leave us in desolation?  
How could you desert this grand city  
And choose the city of the god of death?  
Cursed to see your shattered body thus,  
Not for a moment more do we wish to breathe on this earth.  
Your wealth, palace, wives, worthy sons and army  
All destroyed; retribution indeed;  
The sages were so distressed.  
"Renowned leader of the Rakshasas! Is it that  
You marched off with your army to fight the god of death  
Leaving your body here?" thus lamented  
The disconsolate ladies. Then came Madodari,  
The exquisite beauty, and fell on his chest.  
On that body, the embodiment of supreme masculine charm,  
Deranged from grief, she fell;  
Tears rolling down, screaming, she rolled on the dust,

Embraced his body and wailed,  
Thought of her past life with him and wept.  
Where have you gone O dauntless one, leaving here your body shattered  
Leaving your loved ones, wealth, city, palace and friends,  
Leaving all of us in the never-ending misery caused by war,  
Where have you gone, O enemy of the gods? (Cheeraman, 128-130).

There are no forces of light and darkness engaged in combat here. There are no twin perspectives. There is only the one perspective and what eludes it, separated from itself by the parallax gap. The crux of 'Ramacharitam' is that the divine aura of Vishnu, the prime deity of Bhakti, encompasses all its protagonists and not just the Vishnu incarnate, Lord Rama. It imbues Ravana too. There is no dichotomous antagonism between good and evil. There is no neutral third ground, the big Other, from where Ravana is castigated. This non-duality was the inception of Bhakti, its birth-pangs. (Later poets won't be so lachrymose at Ravana's annihilation, Mandodari's violation etc.). This inchoateness of literary inception, together with historical circumstances, political exigencies of being Dravidian and the stagnant literary currents of linguistic evolution must have prevented Cheeraman from forging with any degree of coherence, a distinct literary character for Kerala in the early 12<sup>th</sup> c. CE itself. That lot fell on another genius, Thunchathu Ezhuthachan. But the continuity had been set.

### **Thunchathu Ramanujan Ezhuthachan-Bhakti between intensity and subtlety**

My words I bequeath to the earth.  
Let these imperfect documents  
Of an uneasy life lend to the roots  
Their sepia shade;  
Let them turn into coal  
In earth's depths.  
When it fuels tomorrow's train  
Give me a seat too:  
I need to go to Tirur  
To ask two questions to Thunchan. (Satchidanandan, 44).

Thunchathu Ezhuthachan (1495-1575) was born in Tirur in the present-day Malappuram district of Northern Kerala. There is a compound still venerated as 'Thunchanprambu' in Tirur where he is supposed to have lived. The 'Vidyarambham' ceremonies are held here, where infants are initiated into the world of learning. Ezhuthachan composed verses in the *kilippattu* (birdsong) format, and has come to be called the 'father of Malayalam'. Malayalis including scholars often tend to think of Ezhuthachan, not as a poet of yore, but as their contemporary or as a poet of modern vintage whose aura has not yet dissipated.<sup>3</sup>

Ezhuthachan was born in a poor family near Thirur railway station in Kozhikode district in Kerala. (George, A Survey of Malayalam Literature, 69).

Ezhuthachan has been compared to a meteor and a rising star and as a genius who eclipsed of his contemporaries. Metaphors related to him have been cosmic. He has been an astral presence in the Malayalam literary firmament.

The first major work done on Kerala Bhakti from a western stand point by a Malayali was 'Ezhuthachan and his Age,' by Chelanat Achyutha Menon: "Dr. Achutha Menon was guided by Dr. L. D. Barnett in his researches on 'Ezhuthachan and His Age,' which won for him the Ph.D degree." (George, Western Influence on Malayalam Language and Literature, 205).

According to K. M. George, the Jesuit missionary L. D. Barnett mastered both Sanskrit and Malayalam with the intention of writing books in Malayalam that would be read by Christians in their homes 'just as the Hindus read Ezhuthachan's *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. Towards this end Padiri also used metres employed by Cherusseri in his *Krishnagadha* and Ezhuthachan in his epic poems.' (George, A Survey, 58). Devotional core of poets like Ezhuthachan and Cherusseri was the non-differentiated, fluid and primordial 'Real', which merged into the periphery of the worldly 'reality' of differentiation, without ever overflowing it. This Christo-mimesis by missionaries points towards such a non-symbolized devotional core. (This argument is contentious and yet like most contentious arguments in Indian philosophy, carries the currents of Advaita).

Medieval Kerala was more interesting than its modern counterpart. Categories like caste and state and geography that are the contemporary markers of identity are not strictly applicable to pre-

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<sup>3</sup> Ezhuthachan was a contemporary of Bacon, Copernicus, Erasmus, Martin Luther, Calvin and Montaigne and was hence not just the father of Malayalam Language and Literature but also the progenitor of its Enlightenment also.

modern Kerala. The pole star of scholarship on medieval Malayalam remains Thunchathu Ezhuthachan (1495-1575CE). According to the *Anthology of Medieval Indian Literature*, edited by K.Ayyappa Paniker, Ezhuthachan belonged to the 16th century CE (but the dates of his birth and death cannot be confirmed with any degree of accuracy), and he was born in Trikkandiyur in Malappuram district. The banks of the Bharathapuzha to where this description locates Ezhuthachan, has been to this day, a site of cultural efflorescence. According to K Ayyappa Paniker, Ezhuthachan was a master of not just Sanskrit and Malayalam, but also of Tamil and Telugu languages, though he spent most of his life as a school master in his native Tirur itself.

Thunchathu Ezhuthachan was born in present-day Tirur in Kerala and the hamlet where he lived and worked exists to this day, though in an altered state, as 'Thunchan Parambu'. He did not come from an illustrious feudal household, but acquired prominence in his life to establish monasteries such as the 'Gurumadom' in Chittoor, where his mortal remains are ritually kept in his memory, in a tiny hamlet now called 'Gurugramom'. Unlike Cherusseri Namboodiri, Ezhuthachan did not have an 'illom' (Brahmin household) or glorious royal patronage that would have served as geographical markers in retrospect. He lived most of his life in the densely populated plains of the river Bharathapuzha and was not given to solitary haunts in the mountains. He did not travel to other realms in search of patronage. Ezhuthachan occupies a rather confined space in the map of spiritual peregrinations in medieval India. Therefore it is easier to locate Ezhuthachan in space rather than in time.

The Thrikkandiyur Shiva Temple in Thirur was dear to Ezhuthachan, father of Malayalam language and poetry. It is not clear how Shiva became a favoured deity to the parrot of this acharya who was a Rama Bhakta. The immense temple grounds and the natural beauty and the serenity and calm must have felt meditative and sacred to Ezhuthachan. Thunchanparambu is not far from Thrikkandiyur. Ezhuthachan's humble abode was located here. Malayalam, a verbal communicated tongue, took birth here as a literary language. Some of the aged trees here must remember the acharya with his palmleaf and stylus. Here there is a deep pond with clear water and a small temple by its side. A stylus found from the compound later in time has been consecrated here. The famed Kanjiram tree (strychnine nuxvomica/poison nut) is still here. Legend has it that its leaves don't taste bitter on Vijayadashami days. This place fills up with people on Vijayadashami day. The Vidyarambham

(ritual initiation into learning of a child) here has become so popular irrespective of caste or religion. The Thunchan day is celebrated every year. (Ravindran, 50-51).

It is believed that towards the end of his life, Ezhuthachan, moved to Chittoor in Palakkad and spent the rest of his days there. His travels in the border areas of present day Kerala and Tamilnadu must have encompassed traditional sites of Sanskritic scholarship.

P. Govinda Pillai, the pre-eminent chronicler of Malayalam literary history has placed Ezhuthachan's period as between 700 and 800 ME (1525/26 and 1625/26 CE), based on his collaboration with Melpathur Narayana Bhattathiri. Melpathoor's age, according to P. Govinda Pillai can be surmised from the 'Ayur arogya saukhya' verse in his 'Narayaneeyam.' Pillai was acutely aware of the need to create Malayalam literature as a chronological artefact that would serve as de facto tradition. This intention sits uneasily alongside more modern endeavours. Pillai in his seminal work on Malayalam literary history 'Malayala Bhashacharitam,' not only compares the Namboodiri Brahmins of Kerala unfavourably with the Jains in Tamil Nadu, but says a bit too harshly that 'the Nambudiri Brahmins of early Kerala, are charged, not only with the neglect of the language of the land and the denial of education to the Shudras, but also with demeaning the latter's status' (Kumar, Udaya 29). According to Chelanat Achyutha Menon, Govinda Pillai, operating in a revelatory mode sans evidence, follows a middle path, between scholars who place Ezhuthachan in the 17th century and others like the grammarian Kovunni Nedungadi, the missionary-lexicographer Herman Gundert, Scottish administrator William Logan and orientalist author AC Burnell who put him in the 15th. It is evident that Menon was not happy with Govinda Pillai's chronology, but was just following the exigencies of submitting a pioneering thesis on Ezhuthachan at the University of London. Govinda Pillai was a pioneer in the sense that he dwelt meta-linguistically and spoke directly to a Malayalam reading public, in a way that was impossible before him.

According to Kesavan Veluthat, Melpathoor's 'Narayaneeyam' is just as significant a text as Ezhuthachan's 'Adhyatma Ramayanam.' Many folk legends also connect the two writers, one of which says that Ezhuthachan in an inebriated state told a beseeching Melpathur, a sworn vegetarian at that, to 'start with the fish' (to begin with the matsya avatar).

It is ironical that Ezhuthachan's chronology has mostly been based on its synchronicity with his more classicist counterparts like Melpathur who wrote in Sanskrit and to whom he apparently was a satellite in the classical scheme of things. But in hindsight Ezhuthachan has eclipsed his more erudite contemporary, whose dates were fixed in the classical schema and who thus serves to place in time Ezhuthachan, the progenitor of Bhasha literature. Due to exigencies of synchronicity Narayana Panikkar, another Ezhuthachan scholar has pushed the date of Ezhuthachan back by fifty more years. PK. Narayana Pillai, follows traditional astrological charts and instruments to opine that Ezhuthachan belonged to the beginning of the 8th c Malayalam Era (16th c CE). As with most legendary figures, Ezhuthachan has been the subject of much apocryphal nonsense that has been woven around his figure. According to Dr. CK. Raja, Ezhuthachan preceded the authors of 'Ramacaritam' and the Niranam poets. The ground for this conclusion is the comparative lack of Tamil influence in Ezhuthachan's works. Tamil according to Dr. Raja, came after Malayalam, though these claims have to be taken with a pinch of salt and do not bear the scrutiny of chronology or common sense. Ulloor, in his magisterial history of Malayalam literature, based on philological comparison places Ezhuthachan in a period between 1495CE and 1575 CE. (Ulloor, an erudite scholar, grammarian and lexicographer, had the privilege of hindsight and distance).

NV. Krishna Warrior, a newspaper editor and poet with a cynical if humorous bent of mind calls various Ezhuthachan paraphernalia which purport to be authentic about his dates, such as an elegiac verse or 'Caramasloka' on his death and a legal transaction deed and another record called 'Kalyanasundaram', as fabrications:

Kerala Bhasha Sahitya Caritram. KBSC. Vol.II.p227 in Vol III Panikkar quotes the so-called elegiac verse –Caramasloka-on Ezhuthachan, the authenticity of which however he questions. According to this verse, Ezhuthachan died in the year 732 ME. In Vol IV of KBSC, Panikkar quotes with approval a deed purporting to record a legal transaction of property, entered into in the year ME 724 on behalf of Ezhuthachan by his disciple Surya Narayanan (p.338). Panikkar also refers to the so-called 'Kalyanasundaram' record. All these 'evidences' have been proven to be fabrications. See PK. Nair, 'Rajahmasam' Vol.I, B 8 (1112 Medam). (Warrior, 155, 179).

Biographical understanding of Ezhuthachan has been a mixture of ‘mythology and fact’, according to writer C.Radhakrishnan.<sup>4</sup> He also says that Ezhuthachan’s dates must have been between 1475 and 1550 CE. Western orientalist authors like AC Burnell place Ezhuthachan’s second generation disciple, Surya Narayanan (who supposedly established the ‘Gurumadom’) in the 17th century CE. Chelanat Achyutha Menon thus surmises that Ezhuthachan must have lived two generations before. Menon also cites William Logan, author of *Malabar Manual*, refuting the claim of another orientalist author FW Ellis’ ascription of a Brahmin patrimony to Ezhuthachan by stating that Ellis must have confused between Ezhuthachan and the Sankaracharya.

C. Radhakrishnan in his biographical fiction, *Theekkadal Kadanju Thirumadhuram* (Churning Ambrosia from Sea of Fire), casts Ezhuthachan as his own ancestor. C.Radhakrishnan adds as an appendix to his fictional recreation of Ezhuthachan’s life that, as a child Ezhuthachan corrected the Vedic recitation of Brahmin elders and thus enraged, they fed him with puffed rice and plantain, and after consuming this the child turned mute, to cure which affliction its father himself prescribed meat and liquor as cure. (The blame for Ezhuthachan being called a drunkard is also often laid at the door of Brahmin sorcery. Ezhuthachan scholarship must have travelled through varying stages of anti-Brahminism.) Radhakrishnan also refutes suggestions that Ezhuthachan turned to Bhakti in a spirit of renunciation engendered by the social turmoil in the wake of the arrival of the Portuguese on the Malabar coast. These observations can be called as speculative at best.

Adulation for Ezhuthachan in Kerala occurs mostly vicariously through the veneration of his texts, especially the ‘Adhyatma Ramayana’ which is religiously recited over the ‘Ramayana Masam.’ There are no temples dedicated to the father of Malayalam language. This transposition of worship from the author to the text has much to do with the persona of Ezhuthachan himself, who chose not to assert himself, but let his words speak for themselves, that too in the voice of Bhakti. He was the textual oracle of Bhakti, and not its corporeal manifestation.

Ezhuthachan came at the end of a long line of illustrious proto-Malayalam, Sanskrit and Manipravalam writers, most of them upper caste, whom he had to propitiate. Manipravalam as a

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<sup>4</sup> Radhakrishnan’s biographical fiction on Ezhuthachan entitled *Theekkadal Kadanju Thirumadhuram* (Churning Ambrosia from the Sea of Fire) would also share some of that blame.

literary language is a case of parallax. Manipravalam is not Sanskrit mixed with its vernacular 'other'. It is Sanskrit in its divine majesty engaged in conversation with what perpetually eluded it.

In the following verses from the beginning of his 'Adhyatma Ramayanam' Ezhuthachan seems apologetic for being so brilliant, but is in fact just connecting himself to a greater tradition while staying close to his roots.

The god of all the world too has sprung  
From the Vedic lore, my teachers have said  
And the Vedas have sprung in turn from the Brahmins  
Whose blessings and curse have the sanction of the gods.  
Who can sing the praise of those  
Noble ones, well-versed in the Vedas?  
I, foremost among the ignorant, born of Brahmin's feet,  
This pious slave, fit only to wash their feet,  
Here dares retell Ramayana, celebrated by the Vedas  
As best as the unwise ever can do. (Ezhuthachan, in Paniker ed,196).

It is widely believed that Ezhuthachan had an equally gifted elder brother and guru, Surya Narayanan. The second-turn of Ezhuthachan is reflected in the history of Malayalam literature, which started under the suzerainty of Sanskrit and even today struggles under the domination of the English language in a strangely diverse and multilingual setup. The belatedness of Malayalam is thus originary. Thus the founding trope of Malayalam literature was a consanguineous parallax and not a Freudian paternal authority with its Oedipal tensions. Casting of Ezhuthachan as the father of Malayalam is also significant in this respect, as he is not an Oedipal father so to speak. As novelist NS. Madhavan puts it, 'the father is more precious, since the father is relatively new. We have always had the mother.' (Madhavan,1997).

Ezhuthachan was simply the most dazzling in a series of recreators of Ramayana starting with Cheeraman who wrote the 'Ramacharitham' in the 12th century AD. Ayyapilla Asan composed his Ramakatha Pattu in the same century. According to Ayyappa Paniker, the 'Ramacharitham' is closer to Tamil than to Manipravalam. In the introductory incantation, Cheeraman, much like Ezhuthachan later in his 'Adhyatma Ramayanam', invokes the deities to propitiate them.



O Goddess of poesy!  
Make the supreme enlightenment sparkle and glow within me.  
O doe-eyed one,  
Place thy lotus-feet on my tongue  
And dance to thy pleasure;  
Dance so that honey sweet words surge up in my mind (Cheeraman, 124)

Cheeraman can be credited with having tried to address a subaltern consciousness more directly than Ezhuthachan later. Malayalam literature before Ezhuthachan encompasses the vernacular but lacks the classical fixity that he brought to it.

The Kannasa poets also are significant, especially Madhava Panikkar who translated the Bhagavad Gita into Malayalam verse. Even Ezhuthachan did not translate the ‘Song of the God’ into lay verse. According to Ayyappa Paniker, this work had a crucial role in promoting Bhakti movement in Kerala. Rama Panikkar, another Kannasa poet retold the 24000 verses of the Valmiki Ramayana into 3059 Malayalam stanzas. They helped absorb the intricate ruby and coral of ‘Manipravalam’ into the more mellifluous ‘pattu’ or song form.

The innovations they (Kannasa Poets) brought about in the structure of the language of poetry paved the way for the evolution of a standard poetic language which got established in the works of Ezhuthachan. (Paniker, 159)

‘The sound of thunder frightens snakes,/But the peacocks dance and rejoice.’ These lines of Kannasa Ramayana appealed so much to Ezhuthachan that he used the metaphor, not found in the original ‘Adhyatma Ramayana’ in his own work, according to K.Ayyappa Paniker. (It is used in the context of Sita’s immense joy at Rama’s breaking of the divine Triyambaka bow. Ezhuthachan says that ‘Sita, overjoyed like a peahen, got excited’.)

Cherusseri Namboodiri, a luminary in Kerala Bhakti composed his ‘Krishnagadha,’ the pivotal text of Krishna Bhakti in Kerala, in the 15th century. Poonthanam Namboodiri, another Kerala Brahmin, composed the ‘Ramayanam Champu.’ The Champu is a Sanskrit poetic form brought to Malayalam. Its exponents include Melpathoor Narayana Bhattathiri, a contemporary of Ezhuthachan and Mazhamangalam, who composed the ‘Naishadham Champu.’ Thus formal inventiveness was a hallmark of the era, though towards the latter part of this efflorescence, there

was a shift towards Sanskrit scholarship, abandoning the earlier tilt towards simpler Malayalam discernible in poets from Cheeraman to Cherusseri. It was at this juncture that Ezhuthachan emerged with his 'Adhyatma Ramayanam', 'Mahabharatham', 'Bhagavatham', 'Harinamakeerthanam' and other compositions, and thus saved the day for Malayalam. His influence has been so pervasive that Herman Gundert, the Christian missionary and lexicographer often called the 'foster father' of Malayalam, felt compelled to base his 1868 'Keralolpathi' on 'Kerala Natakam' which is, perhaps incorrectly, ascribed to Ezhuthachan.

The polity of 16th century Kerala was fraught with internecine conflicts between petty Kingdoms, since the writ of the Zamorin of Kozhikode did not extend beyond his immediate realm. Vasco da Gama landed in Kappad in Kozhikode in 1498. Even before that Muslim merchants from the middle-east had made their presence felt. Ancient Kerala had trade relations with Rome and amphora and other artefacts from this trade have been found.

He (Ezhuthachan) mastered both the Sanskrit sastras and the Tamil classics when a youth. He set up a school in his village that all children could attend. All this would have been impossible a century earlier, before the Portugese arrived. (Nambisan, 12).

According to the mostly apocryphal and unreliable journals of Ibn Batuta, translated into Malayalam by Velayudhan Panikkasseri, Kerala had a vibrant trans-global trading system, especially in spices like pepper. Batuta also mentions the relative safety he enjoyed in the streets of Malabar and the strict punishments that were meted out even for petty crimes which apparently acted as a deterrent! Another chronicle, the *Thuhfathul Mujahideen* (translated as *Kerala in the 15th and 16th centuries* by Velayudhan Panikkasseri), details major hostilities that had developed between the Zamorin and his Muslim sidekicks on the one side and the Portugese on the other. These cataclysmic events involving native and foreign actors of all hues and ideologies, fashioned the milieu in which Ezhuthachan wrote his works. The tension of these times can be traced as undercurrents in Ezhuthachan's oeuvre though they are not essential to his craft or substance.

The stature of Ezhuthachan in shaping Malayalam language, society and literature over the ages is equalled only by Parasurama, a deity supposed to have geographically carved or rather precipitated Kerala from the ocean by throwing an axe from Gokarna to Kanyakumari according

to an apocryphal legend and also perhaps by the historical Sankara, the advaita philosopher and sage, and the political figure of EMS Namboodiripad, the first chief minister of Kerala after its formation in 1956, and the author of books like *Onnekal Kodi Malayalikal* (one and a half crore Malayalis) and *Keralam Malayalikalude Mathrubhumi* (Kerala, the motherland of Malayalis). While Parasurama was an avatar and a deity, Sankara and EMS were caste Brahmins (and belonging to the upper crest among the Brahmin elite). Even the originary tale of Kerala called ‘Keralolpathi’ starts with relating the settlement in Kerala of a group of Brahmins from Ahichchattrra in Northern India. (See Panikkaseri, Keralolpathi)

Though not much is known of biographical note about Ezhuthachan, it is widely believed that he belonged to the Nair caste. This seemingly irrelevant fact has had much impact on the shaping of Malayalam language and literature, as one of the modern dynamic regional languages of India, that has recently been conferred the status of a classical language.

Ezhuthachan’s Bhakta status came to him as a chronicler of Gods and not as a raconteur of man. In this way he transcends biography because in the Indic traditions the self melts away before the magnificence of deity. Central among his deities is Rama, who is comparable to Jesus and Hamlet alone in literary gravitas and charisma. In this sense, Ezhuthachan was someone who served the function of the gospel writers and Shakespeare for Malayalam literature, but veneration for whom has since been transposed on to the deity.

‘Keralolpathi,’ a compendium of legends that had acquired historical status, claims that non-Brahmins were ascribed various roles and statuses by their Brahmin overlords. Ezhuthachan, much like Sree Narayana Guru later, was someone who acquired a sort of scholarly ‘Brahminhood’ through his Karma and this combined with the various socio-political and historical factors that later posited him as the father of Malayalam language, has changed the entire metaphysics of literary historiography in Kerala. This includes the opening up of an enabling high-low manifold which can be called a parallax, which denotes the poet’s ability to operate simultaneously in two registers much like the slesa poets of Sanskrit yore who would dabble in the sacred and the erotic in the same verse. (These slesa poems were often denigrated as Chitrakavyas or ‘picture poems’ and the last thing Ezhuthachan might have wanted was to be known as a picture poet.)

It was through Ezhuthachan that Malayalis experienced for the first time the textual manifestation of deity. That enchantment continues unabated in intensity even today. Ezhuthachan composed verses in the kilippattu<sup>5</sup> (birdsong) format, and has come to be called the father of Malayalam. ‘Ezhuthachan was a bhakti-romantic and Kumaran Asan was a romantic of the age of humanism. The rampant spread of romanticism in Malayalam was a result of the absence of a counterbalancing classical tradition’ (Nizarudeen, 43).

Claims abound about Ezhuthachan’s subaltern origins and these are speculative at best. It could be surmised that he came from a non-Brahmin family<sup>6</sup>. Nayars are ‘the’ dominant caste in Kerala today, and can hardly be called ‘lower caste,’ as Vijay Nambisan ventures to do, perhaps due the complexity of the medieval caste hierarchy, or he must be driving at a hierarchy within the caste edifice itself, at the level of sub-caste formations, since Ezhuthachan, according to some legends, belonged to the oil-presser (chakkala) sub-caste.

Ezhuthachan was from a low caste Nayar family, but he mastered both the Sanskrit sastras and the Tamil classics when a youth. He set up a school in his village that all children could attend. All this would have been impossible a century earlier, before the Portugese arrived. (Nambisan, 12).

The contrast between the Brahmin and non-Brahmin traditions is a major parallax gap in dealing with the literary back stories, legends and anecdotes of Kerala. The prevailing matrilineal tradition in Kerala only accentuated this vis-a-vis kinship relations. Heroes and legendary figures like Ezhuthachan are often appropriated into the Brahmin castes. There is also the category of miraculous birth by the blessings of a Brahmin person.

Among the many prevailing legends on Kerala, those regarding Brahmins and non-Brahmins, though structurally similar, vary in content. There have been obvious attempts to link the heroes to Brahmins by birth. In the story of Thunchathu Ezhuthachan, the Brahmin is the genitor himself. Then there are those gifted a birth by the blessings of a Brahmin. (Warrier and Gurukkal, 120).

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<sup>5</sup> Kilippattu is actually a complex prosody which contains a metrical mixture of four vernacular schemes-Keka, Kakali, Annanada and Kalakanji. Their very names are sonorous with music.

<sup>6</sup> It should be kept in mind that the Nairs of Kerala widely intermarried with the Nambudiri Brahmins under the ‘sambandham’ system wherein younger sons of Nambudiri clans made semi-formal marital alliances with Nair women. This practice led to the survival of the erstwhile matrilineal system in Kerala.

The attempt to impute a 'twice-born' origin to Ezhuthachan himself have been repudiated but such legends serve as illustrative of the historical strands of reception of his works down the ages among scholars and lay people alike, which is analogous to the linguistic choices that he had to make in his compositions that were tricky due to political, aesthetic and pragmatic considerations. A divine origin could have in all probability been claimed for a Brahmin person of his stature.

PK. Pokker makes the rather contestable and flimsy claim that Ezhuthachan helped sustain the hegemonic ideology:

Though Thunchathu Ezhuthachan, the father of Malayalam language, made significant contributions to Malayalam literature, he could not breach the sphere of topics engendered by the hegemonic ideology. He who made available to the avarnas, a cultural stream that was the preserve of Brahminism, in other ways surrendered the Malayali consciousness to the hegemonic ideology. (Pokker).

The very consciousness which Pokker accuses Ezhuthachan of surrendering to Vedic Brahmanism, was perhaps created due to his efforts. Historian of Malayalam language and classical scholar PK.Balakrishnan has analysed the 'Bharatham Kilippattu' and the 'Adhyatma Ramayanam,' composed by Ezhuthachan. For Balakrishnan, the pivotal character in Mahabharata is not Krishna, but Karna<sup>7</sup> (and therefore his stance is not one that is inflected by Bhakti) and he stresses on the role of Karna in the original Sanskrit Mahabharatha composed by Vyasa and its transcreation in Malayalam by Ezhuthachan. He also finds the 'Adhyatma Ramayanam' as a compendium of the 'grotesque,' albeit in a pleasant fashion. According to Balakrishnan, Ezhuthachan's supreme poetic gift is organically related to a sort of debility and that the serene lotus will not bloom but from the mire of that debility, and so much must be evident to those who seek for the roots of Ezhuthachan's poetic craft that they lie in the earthen ground and not in the lofty Himalayas. Such an investigation into the source of Ezhuthachan's poetic craft has to take note of the anatomy of his 'Adhyatmaramayanam.' Balakrishnan posits that it follows from such an endeavour that just as the 'Bharatham Kilippattu' is not a precise translation of Vyasa's 'Mahabharatha,' the 'Ramayanam Kilippattu' also is not an exact word-

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<sup>7</sup> Balakrishnan's later work 'Ini Jnanurangatte' (Let Me Sleep Now) centres on the character of Draupadi in the Mahabharata.

by-word translation of the Sanskrit 'Ramayana' by Valmiki. Translation can be said in this case to be the task of transcreating a celebrated and extraordinary text in one language into another language while retaining its extraordinariness and cultural specificity even as it is made available to another audience, and a gap opens up between the two by the very act of translation. The special nature of the source text, its divinity, the divine nature of its hero, and the robustness of a target language to receive that extraordinarily special text are pre-requisites for the translator or transcreator.

If analysed as a kavya based on the rules of poetic craft, 'Adhyatmaramayana' is a compendium of the grotesque. No clues exist today to surmise the form of colloquial Malayalam used during Ezhuthachan's period. (Balakrishnan, Ezhuthachan's Craft, 84)

The non-Brahmin as the non-divine was grotesque. His/her grotesque tongue, with its rough edges and guttural sounds had to be elevated to an exalted scriptural status in the 'Adhyatma Ramayana' and other works of Ezhuthachan.

The Prophecy of the Parrot: the 'Adhyatma Ramayana' has been called a 'kilippattu', which roughly translates as 'birdsong.' The conception behind this terminology was that, the essence of the epic being tragic, if it was chanted by the writer himself, ill fate would befall him and hence the figure (real or imaginary, most probably metaphorical) of an avian intermediary reader was interposed in the form of a parrot. Ezhuthachan has adopted mostly Malayalam metres (Keka, Kakali, Annanada, Kalakanchi) rather than the more popular and accepted Sanskrit metres and this has imparted a folk and earthy rhythm and quality to his epic translation and ironic apologist that he was this could be why the metaphor of the transposed parrot was found convenient. Such was the general scholarly inclination towards Sanskrit during the Manipravalam era and afterwards that such an animalistic feature which imparted a fable-like quality to the Sanskrit epic in its native translation was necessary.

### **Ramayanamasam: Oral tradition and Integration of Readerly Response in Kerala**

Ezhuthachan's oeuvre especially his 'Adhyatma Ramayanam' has helped create a community of readership in Kerala. The ritual recitation of this work has led to the emergence of a literary commons in Kerala, before the advent of the Library Movement (Grandhashala Saghom) led by PN. Panicker (b.1902).

In Kerala, during Karkidakam, the last month of the Malayalam year, the epic Ramayana, in its bhakti version 'Adhyatma Ramayana'(composed Malayalam as by Thunchathu Ezhuthachan) is ritually recited in households as well as in temples where Vishnu is the main deity. The recitation which begins on the first day of this rainy month (traditionally called 'panja Karkidakam,' 'panja masam' or the month of scarcity) generally concludes on the last day of Karkidakam. During this month, after twilight, the traditional lamp called 'nilavilakku' is lighted and the reader traditionally sits cross-legged before the lamp, or on a chair if he/she is elderly, and the 'Adhyatma Ramayana' is recited in front of the lamp. The new moon day of the month is dedicated to ancestor worship, accompanied by special rituals. Pilgrimage is also often undertaken during the 'Ramayana Masam,' called the 'Nalambalam Darsanam.'

Medieval Kerala was a hierarchical society riddled by the vagaries of the caste system. There were rigid rituals and spatial demarcations and customs forged in the smithy of caste. People belonging to the lower strata were required by caste and feudal laws to keep a certain distance from the touchable castes so that even their shadows wont' be grazing the elite. Even the shadow of a lower-caste person could 'pollute.' Even in modern times it has been called a madhouse. The Bhakti movement which came with the 'Adhyatma Ramayanam' was a whiff of fresh air. It spread light to the dark corners of the geographical area now called Kerala which then was a backwater of backwardness.

As popularly believed, the Bhakti movement in Kerala was spearheaded by Thunchathu Ezhuthachan, Cherusseri Namboodiri and Poonthanam Namboodiri. There were numerous other unknown and unsung bards and saints and monks whose works have been irrevocably lost. The spirit of Bhakti could not have been kindled without it being widespread and thus achieving a sort of threshold momentum.

It can be plausibly believed that the Bhakti movement helped destabilize the entrenched caste system. Bhakti exposed the decaying structure of the hierarchical caste system. On top of this was built the edifice of medieval caste-ridden Kerala.

Bhakti poetry and the Bhakti movement in general were not rhetorical. It was an outpouring of the devotional spirit as in Ezhuthachan, who entreats the goddess of knowledge to grace him with her ever abundant supply of suitable words. The devotee, whether Cherusseri or

Poonthanam, felt humbled by the majesty of the deity and in that spirit of submission there was no place for the twice-born caste pride.

Dwell forever, O Mother Word, on my tongue  
Imaged in letters, the incarnate soul of the Vedas!  
Dance,dance on my tongue, O deer-eyed maid!  
Dance shameless like the naked Shiva in the woods,  
O maid that dwells on the lily-face of the lotus-born Brahma  
O benevolent Bharati! Let the words surge up in me forever and forever  
Words, fair,well-featured, reel and roll and well up in me.  
Ceaseless, continuous like the billowing waves of the mighty sea!

(Ezhuthachan, in Paniker(ed.), 196.)

By now it is commonly believed that the Bhakti movement<sup>8</sup> exposed the hollowness of caste pride. Poets like Ezhuthachan and Poothanam Namboodiri used the Bhakti idiom to coruscate the meaningless social conventions centered around caste and class and privilege. He used the religious idiom to help dismantle the structures imposed by religion. Bhakti movement gave the downtrodden access to the deity if not to the Vedic tradition itself. Bhakti poetry gave confidence to the downtrodden. It was a major change in the Kerala society. It gave self-dignity to people on the margins who were cast away from the centre of society, and who were stamped as inferior and were oppressed, debased as slaves. Interesting neither Ezhuthachan nor the other Malayalam bhakti poets assume a revolutionary stance. It was not a tussle between the caste-ridden society and an egalitarian utopia. Rather the bhakti parallax was between caste society and what eluded it. According to Slavoj Žižek, those outside the ambit of the ‘Varnashramadharmā’, are in a position similar to the Asiatic mode of production in Marxist thought - the invisible remainder which cannot be incorporated. Hence Žižek also calls Ambedkar’s statement ‘no castes without outcastes’ the supreme definition of ideology. (Žižek, Annual Navayana Lecture)

In the ‘Adhyatma Ramayana’ the Rama figure could stand for the ‘paramatma’ itself that dwells in each human according to a pantheistic benevolence, which does not separate innate divine qualities of humans and posits them as an alienating deity. Bhakti proclaimed the spiritual

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<sup>8</sup>John Stratton Hawley argues that Bhakti was not a movement, but rather a network.



equality of all. Bhakti ideology upheld that devotion is the devotee's hallmark, whether Brahmana or not. Both of them have the same atman. Therefore there are no untouchables. According to Žižek, 'it doesn't look good for Manu'. (Žižek, Annual Navayana Lecture)

Ezhuthachan's prophetic vision regarding the emergence of a robust local tongue that would soon rival Sanskrit in its popularity, and his choice of subject and source text, made him a strong candidate for honorary Brahminhood. He himself was aware of such ironies and often mentioned them in his verse. Poonthanam, another Bhakti poet was a Namboodiri Brahmin who chose to write in earthy Malayalam, either due to his lack of scholarship or abject devotion before the deity, Krishna.

There is an anecdote of Melpathoor Bhattathiri circumambulating the Guruvayoor temple while chanting a sloka from his 'Narayaneeyam' and a young Namboodiri corrected him on a finer point and directed him to consult Poonthanam for further information. Some distant echoes can be listened to here, of competition in poetic vocabulary between Sanskrit and Malayalam and of love tinged pride in the vernacular Malayalam. (Warrier and Gurukkal, 124).

According to Rajan Gurukkal, Bhakti was not a solely subaltern enterprise, but it had elite sanction too since it propagated through the temples that were either owned or controlled by the *brahmanas*. The 'Adhyatma Ramayana,' composed by Ezhuthachan, introduced a new brand of devotion, that was intensely personal and in contrast to the temple-centric religion. It expressed a new 'religious sensibility.' Gurukkal also posits the historical context of bhakti as the 'consolidation of the contradictory agrarian relations of contemporary village society.' Thus Bhakti while falling short of being a resurrection, nevertheless was the product of social contradictions and expressed them in its corpus of literature. The masses were so oppressed that they needed some kind of solace which was provided by bhaktiin the guise of devotion. The local deity and the local place of worship turned into centres of meditation and peaceful reverie and intense personal devotion<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup>Credit goes to Ezhuthachan and the egalitarian spirit of Bhakti for the fact that he himself was not consecrated as a deity until modern secular times.

Inventing other-worldly explanations for the social contradictions of domination and providing a psychological basis for social acceptance of the plight of the dominated, *bhakti* glossed over the material reality of the conditions of oppression. The *bhakti* hymns of the Alvars and Nayanars portraying the enslaved and bonded status of the devotees to their deities, in fact, mirrored the way the subjected and exploited lived their relation with their oppressive conditions of existence. (Gurukkal, 293).

Most of the radical path breaking writers of each era have demolished the existing monopolies on thought processes, and thereby restructured their own visions which were often mythological and created their own independent space. Writers have always accomplished this surge through transgressing linguistic and cultural barriers and by resisting colonising attempts. It was through a similar deployment of bhakti devotion in his poetic wielding of language that Ezhuthachan was able to become at the same time an upholder of tradition, and an iconoclast.

Whatever might be the truth behind epithets that qualify him as poet of the past-present-future and father of the Malayalam language, such glorification of him has risen from his wielding of language that Ezhuthachan was able to become at the same time an upholder of tradition, modernist among modernists and postmodernist among postmodernists. Whatever might be the truth behind epithets that qualify him as poets of the past-present-future and father of the Malayalam language, such glorification of him has arisen from this backdrop. (Sreedharan, 140).

In that portion of the ‘Adhyatma Ramayanam Kilippattu’ where Rama and Laxman meet the demon Kabandha, Ezhuthachan presents the demon Kabandha as a body without organs, ie sans face, chest, limbs or head. This is in accordance with Žižek’s criticism of ideology pace Deleuze.

Later Sreerama, along with Sumitra’s son  
Sad, entered the forest forlorn, and  
Seeking Sita searching directions  
With ready courage, travelling the forest  
Came upon a creature in demon form  
Instantly Ramachandra uttered:  
“Sans face, chest and limbs  
And other organs what is this being?

Laxman! You could be scared seeing this  
He could eat us up now know this  
That which is not bird or animal strange! strange!  
Has no face, chest arms or head  
Before the demon eats us up alive  
Ways to save us can't be seen if you think of it.  
We are in the midst of his arms young man!  
That which is prepared by destiny will come about.”

(Ezhuthachan, Adhyatmaramayanam, 200)

It would be presumptuous to claim that Ezhuthachan intended to subvert scripture on such a massive scale, yet the amorphous and fledgling social sphere is reflected in these lines. Scripture is being rewritten and it doesn't seem radical in the least since the poet is not taking a contrarian position. One of Žižek's favourite quotes is the Hollywood boss and film magnate Sam Goldwyn's quip, 'we need newer cliches'. The scripture might belong to sacral tradition. But bhakti was in search of a newer tradition.

Ezhuthachan has been also called Thunchathu 'Ramanujan' Ezhuthachan, thus appropriating him as a subaltern. But this version that casts him as an outcaste has been hotly contested. It is safe to surmise that he belonged in the margins of the scholarly elite class and thus held a liminal position which predisposed him towards Bhakti as a trope. His economy of expression, especially in erotic passages, points not to a prudishness that was uncharacteristic for his age, but to the poet's consciousness of his own impoverished circumstances and his ascetic temperament.

It is interesting that Bhakti posits no separate origin myths. It adopted a more rational and logical position in terms of the origin of humankind. Bhakti stated that if the human body is built from the five elements (wind, water, earth, sky and fire) the same elements go into the making of all human beings and hence there is no rational basis for the hierarchy based on caste.

There are no separate elements for the various castes and classes and the elements comprising the Chandala body will tomorrow flow into the Brahmin body and vice versa and the universe as a whole is an aggregation of such flows, and therefore pride based on this physical body is false. This position of Bhakti was nothing short of a revolutionary proclamation of the Vedic principle,

unknown to mere mechanical chanters of the Vedas. By making knowledge more accessible, Bhakti poets created a mini renaissance in medieval Kerala. The darkness of unknowing created by the caste system was gradually dispelled. Thus the stage was set for the development of a progressive society. It gave poets a sense of purpose, which agenda has been taken up even by modern poets like Kumaran Asan who worked with Sree Narayana Guru.

It was through the works of Ezhuthachan that Malayalam gained widespread recognition and freed itself from the shackles of Sanskrit and Tamil. Malayalam language poetry became a matter of prestige and the tradition of viewing Malayalam language poets as half-poets came to an end. The contribution of birdsong (kilippattu) and bhakti movement to the development of art forms like Kathakalai cannot be understated. (Nair, P. Krishnan 346).

Ezhuthachan's choice of the local Malayalam language which was in its fledgling state then for composing his 'Adhyatma Ramayanam' is my primary focus here. (Rich Freeman has his own version of the origin of Malayalam language.) Mother tongue then was only a vague concept as Sheldon Pollock says. Linguistic and literary competition between Sanskrit and Malayalam languages must have passed through periods of varying intensities. Aficionados of each language rooted for its relative superiority.

The superiority and divine origin of Sanskrit is often exalted whereas in effect, it is the earthy rootedness of Malayalam which is celebrated. Such debates can often be reductive and petty and cheap despite the scholarly milieu. Legendary is the supposed antagonism between the Sanskrit scholar Melpathoor and the Bhakti poet Poonthanam. Such narratives delve deeper into the text. The confrontation was between Poonthanam's 'bhakti' and Melpathoor's 'vibhakti' and is celebrated even today. These stories buttress the fact that in the matter of enjoyable delectation, Malayalis prefer Poonthanam's piety to Melpathur's erudition. Another notable point is that the Guruvayoor temple in Northern Kerala forms the backdrop to many of these legends.

According to Sheldon Pollock, localization of spoken language (vernacularization) in medieval South Asia was a profound aesthetic as well as political process. This change in the public sphere was similar to the cosmopolitan changes that took place in the Sanskrit cosmopolis. But it helped bring about a 'new regime of culture and power that is still imperfectly understood,' (Pollock, 435) of which Bhakti poetry was but a part.

Regarding Ezhuthachan's oeuvre, the localization of the deity part did not apply. Rather he was interested in the appropriation of the Sanskrit idiom along with the deity. Rather than exalting a local deity like Murukan or perhaps a matrilineal mother goddess, he retained the devotional spirit of the Sanskrit original while rendering it in the local language. Medieval Malayalam was a hodgepodge of various linguistic influences and streams of thought including Portuguese, Arabic and Dutch reflected in its eclectic vocabulary. It was this linguistic concoction that Ezhuthachan mullled into what became a sort of magic potion for generations of Malayalam speakers.

It goes without saying that such linguistic transformations were often mercantile and secular in nature without the direct intervention of religion due to the process of 'regional vernacularization.' The dominant idiom of classical Sanskrit was set aside in favour of values that pre-existed the Sanskrit cosmopolis, of which medieval Kerala was also a part despite the arrival of Portuguese traders in the late 15<sup>th</sup> century. Vijay Nambisan observes that though the Portuguese who arrived with the landing of Vasco da Gama in Kappad in 1498 persecuted believers of all stripes, 'they broke the back of the caste system. Kerala society was forced to grow up and face a new world that was as treacherous as it was brave, and Malayalam perforce grew up with it.' (Nambisan, 11) Along with Sanskrit were set aside classical traditions of individual authorship, text, genre and patronage that existed since the Vedic times. Religious identities became regional, an example of which is Virashaivism. It changed from a bhakti oriented evangelical socio-religious philosophical movement to a Brahmin subcaste. The elevation in status of the Nairs as a social group post Ezhuthachan's literary activism is also a case in point. Thus Bhakti was rendering unstable caste hierarchies in all sorts of ways, both horizontally across the 'jatis' and vertically across the more rigid 'varnas.'. But it is perhaps of interest to note that Ezhuthachan did not propound a new philosophical cult and this was perhaps the reason that his Bhakti and devotional compositions became available to Malayalis across caste and class barriers.

Shrivirashaivism took root in predominantly Tamil areas. Pilgrimage created new public spheres and networks of inter-regional circulation of ideas of Bhakti. It was these currents that took the Ramayana tale to a Malayalam speaking audience. Narasimha Mehta and Pushtimarga thus propounded the Bhakti doctrine in medieval Gujarat. Sheldon Pollock says that :

‘The bhakta Narasi has purified the land of Gurjaras,’ says the Bhaktamala, a late 16<sup>th</sup> century collection of hagiographies. The new vernacularism, then –noncosmopolitan, regional, desi in outlook-combined a different, local way of poetry making with a different, local way of spiritual being. (Pollock, 436).

Sitanshu Yashaschandra quotes a medieval Gujarati stanza that was popular, poking gentle fun at the relatively low status of the local tongue vis-a-vis the other so-called elite languages.

Idharudhar ka solahi ana atheikathe ka bar

Ikdamtikadam athahi ana su-pa paisa car

[In exchange] idharudhar [Hindi for ‘here and there’] gets sixteen annas [an entire rupee],

Atheikathai [Marvadi for ‘here and somewhere’] gets twelve annas,

Ikadamtikadam [Marathi for ‘here and there’] gets eight [annas],[but] su-sa [Gujarati for ‘something and nothing’] [gets merely] four paise. (Yashaschandra, 153)

This cross-cultural circulation of fledgling languages in the majestic shadow of Sanskrit and their relative hierarchical status, in a caste-ridden milieu, has been studied by Sheldon Pollock who opines that the features in the developmental trajectories of languages like Kannada and Gujarati and their literatures were replicated elsewhere. Madhav Kandali was Ezhuthachan’s counterpart in Assam in Eastern India who transliterated the Ramayana into Assamese. In his wake arose the celebrated Vishnu Bhakti cult propounded by the Vaishnavite scholar and saint Sankardeva. Interestingly Sankardeva was a Brahmin and according to Pollock, a counter movement took place by which what was an anti-Brahminical tradition got assimilated into what was essentially a Sanskritized cult. This has parallels in the Kannada territory far removed from Assam). This happened during the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries also. Similarly the oeuvres of Kabir and Dadu also led to complex patterns of resistance to the dominant idiom. The authorship of essentially authorless texts was a fraught issue. Not just within the Indian sub-continent, but these movements had repercussions in Indo-China. The dethroning of Sanskrit by regional vernaculars in India was paralleled in Java by a similar process in which the cosmopolitan Kakawin was superseded by the indigenous Kidung. Kakawin was heavily Sanskritized whereas Kidung was earthy and local. This had its impact on literacy and other social factors.

There were certainly divergences from this pattern of secondary revolution; the regional-vernacular challenge driven by new forms of religious consciousness was by no means uniform across South Asia. In Telugu, cosmopolitan vernacularity was never seriously interrupted, the high style maintaining its vitality into the early modern period. And with regard to Brajbhasha, subsequent to the bhakti innovations the cosmopolitan vernacular was spectacularly reinforced by the poets of ritikal from the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century until the coming of European modernity. (Pollock,435-436).

Pollock then refers to earliest works originating from the westernmost parts of the Sanskrit cosmopolis in Gujarat in the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries. The *Bharatesvar Bahubali Ghor* (which is a vernacular version of the narrative of Bahubali from the *Adipurana*), and the erotically inflected ‘Vasantavilasa’ carry no devotional baggage. In the geographic middle of the Sanskrit cosmopolis, the major poet Visnudas who vernacularized local idioms was not influenced by Bhakti and if there were any reverberations of Bhakti they were ‘remarkably muted.’

Medieval South India bore certain uncanny resemblances with the Javanese and Indo-Chinese milieus. According to Sheldon Pollock, this extends from Kakawin-dominated Java through Malayalam in Kerala down to Sinhala speaking Sri Lanka. Pollock claims that, “14<sup>th</sup> century Malayali compositions (courtesan works like the Vaisikatantram [the libertine’s rulebook]and the Accicaritam triad constitute some of the earliest textualized Malayali materials), the process of vernacularization was entirely untouched by religious concerns.” (Pollock, 429) There are contradictions in sources of the Sangham literature Tamil. Therefore Bhakti cannot be dated back to emergence of Sangham poetry. The timeline is even more confused in Malayalam. Sangham arguably is the oldest written literary tradition, yet it is difficult to date, and the emergence of vernacular bhakti from the classical lingo is hard to pinpoint. These are difficulties the literary historian has to face.

If one goes by this, the possibility of decisively matching the advent of Bhakti with the emergence of vernacularization, appears moreslim. In the Tamil country as well as in Kerala, the vernacularization and the gradual sidelining of Sanskrit from literary composition was a complex process. Tamil, according to Sheldon Pollock had categories that differentiated between correct and colloquial Tamil, even before the advent of Sanskrit inspired marga-desi binary, which he says must not be conflated with the other major dichotomy of the great and little traditions of

India. Cosmopolitanism of the margi-desi traditions and the coral and ruby (manipravalam) tradition in Kerala, which almost became a highly stylized literary language in Kerala, is significant enough to be worth noting.

The specificities and local contexts of these various languages like Gujarati, Kannada, Assamese, Tamil as well as Malayalam has to be kept in mind as they had different historical trajectories of evolution and development and there also existed certain ‘epistemological differences’ in terms of theological doctrine. The margi-desi binary does not coincide with the high art-low art or classical-romantic dichotomies<sup>10</sup>. So it cannot be categorically stated that while the Valmiki ‘Ramayana’ was margi in character, the ‘Adhyatma Ramayana’ by Ezhuthachan was its ‘desi’ manifestation. In Tamil there was the bifurcation between correct and proper ‘Chentamil’ and the more colloquial version called ‘Kuntuntamil.’ In Malayalam, the analogous category for such a dichotomy would be the ‘ruby and coral’ synthesis of Sanskrit and Malayalam.

Sheldon Pollock also argues that in the Sanskrit cosmopolis there was no room for region-specific socio-political or cultural salience. Regional variations were subsumed under the rubric of classical Sanskrit even though cosmopolitanism thrived, it was not a multi-culturalism in a post-modern sense of the term. According to Pollock, the Bengali and Malayalam versions of the Sanskrit epic Mahabharata remain faithful to the Sanskrit original and show no variation in dialect or rituals or points of view or ideologemes based on regional disparities. Local literary formations were viewed as inalienable parts of a global discourse. Such glocal currents were common and Malayalam, spoken in Kerala, was not a stranger to such cross currents. But such was not the case in Bhakti, as will be shown in the next chapter.

This tendency to accept and fuse what was best in other schools reached its acme at the hands of Ezhuthachan, who made classical Malayalam at once popular and profound. (George, A Survey of Malayalam Literature, 57).

Even in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, the local literary culture in a place like western India (which could be surmised to include the Western Malabar coast as well) could be understood only within the wider rubric of the global Sanskrit Cosmopolis spanning the Indian ocean rim regions. This does

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<sup>10</sup> It would be a misnomer to call Bhakti poetry as ‘romantic’ since it retained its conformist religious core and was not a Blakean alternative mythology.



not of course mean that the universal was forever subsuming the local particulars. But these little traditions were non-substantial and carried little weight or credibility. Though the epic world of Sanskrit had its regional divisions, it was mostly homogenous. Sheldon Pollock makes the observation that the Bengali and Malayali recensions of the Ramayana contain no traces of Bengali or Malayali cultural practice. Grammarians and compendiums of grammatical rules also played a role in enforcing this homogeneity. Though the Vedic religion accepted of local variations, these were all in the last case subsumed under the wider ethical and moral category of obligations. Apart from the universal Sanskrit cosmopolis, the local particular had no socio-political or cultural or literary voice, relevance, credibility.

*Keralabhasha* is the Ganga which originates from the Himalayas, which is Sanskrit and joins with Jamuna (daughter of Kalinda mountains) which is *Dravidabhasha*. Let this language play on my heart. (Nedungadi, qtdin George, A Survey, 3).

According to Sreedhara Menon, the suzerainty of the Portuguese over Malabar, led to revival of the Bhakti movement in Kerala:

The peculiar political, social and economic conditions of the age created a mental and religious stir among the Hindus and led to the widespread popularity of the doctrine of Bhakti. The Portuguese period was one of political violence, social decadence and economic depression. The local chiefs were engaged in interminable quarrels among themselves and intrigued with foreign powers to ruin their own brethren. The Portuguese were indulging in atrocities such as large-scale massacres of civilian population and destruction of temples and mosques and this created a feeling of revulsion in the minds of the common people. There was utter demoralisation in the ranks of all classes following the Portuguese attempt to buy off the native rulers and their officers by presents and gifts. (Menon, Sreedhara 193-194)

According to St. Francis Xavier, as quoted by Sreedhara Menon, robbery was so common that it was seldom considered a fault. This has to be read in conjunction with sage Valmiki's 'purvasrama' of being a robber from which he was transformed following an encounter with a group of sages who instructed him to enquire of his wife and children whether they would partake of his bad karma, which karmic debt they declined to fulfil, thus leading Valmiki to be a bhakta of Rama.

The picture that Sreedhara Menon paints of medieval Kerala is hardly a rosy one. The feudal janmi system, a variant of the jajmani system together with the caste hierarchy and a patriarchal setup solidified into an unequal and hierarchical society. At the same time the invention of machines of war like cannons and the like led the populace to crave for some sort of spiritual solace. The monopoly attained by the European traders stifled a vibrant cosmopolitan society and economy and led to poverty and strife which reflect in the works of the era.

New leaders now emerged on the scene with emphasis on the doctrine of Bhakti (ie absolute devotion to a personal god) as the supreme means of attaining salvation. A number of literary works were produced with Bhakti as the all-embracing theme. Vishnu in the form of Krishna and Rama came to be glorified in the works of the writers of the age. The most outstanding exponent of the Bhakti cult was Thunchathu Ezhuthachan., the ‘Father of Malayalam language.’ He wrote such devotional works as ‘Adhyatmaramayanam’, ‘Mahabharatham’, ‘Harinamakeerthanam’ etc, in which he preached to the common people the doctrine of selfless devotion and surrender to God in the form of Vishnu. Ezhuthachan’s Ramayanam became the most popular poem in the Malayalam language and it won for him the same place in Malayalam as is held by Kambar in Tamil and Tulsidas in Hindi. (Menon, S.193-194).

### **Poonthanam Namboodiri and Melpathur Narayana Bhattathiri:**

Poonthanam Namboodiri (1547-1640) is supposed to have lived during the latter half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century and the early half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century in the present day Malappuram district of Kerala state in India. Poonthanam was a devotee of Krishna (Guruvayoorappan/Lord of Guruvayoor). He lost a beloved child to a freak accident and then onwards turned to bhakti devotion to Krishna. He lived near Perinthalmanna in present-day Kerala. He advocated namasmaranam and namasankeerthanam (remembrance of the Lord and chanting of the Lord’s name. Perhaps his most famous line is ‘when the infant Krishna is playing within you/do you need children of your own’, written after the demise of a beloved child.

Near Keezhattoor Panchayat, and Pandikkad, there is a seemingly abandoned two-storeyed structure and compound. This was the ‘Poonthanam Illom’ where the bhakti poet Poonthanam lived. The author of ‘Bhashakarnamritham’, ‘Jnanappana’, and

‘Kumaraharanam’ was born here. Till recently, one of the poet’s descendants was residing here. ...Near the Illom premises, by the fields is a Sreekrishna Temple where the poet worshipped and which he helped maintain. (Ravindran.46).

Poonthanam Namboodiri<sup>11</sup> was a compatriot and contemporary of the major Sanskrit scholar Melpathur Narayana Bhattathiri. ‘Narayaneeyam’ is an erudite work by Melpathur Narayana Bhattathiri. Many legends, probable and apocryphal are in prevalence connecting these two legendary scholars. One of the legends has it that the Lord himself preferred Poonthanam’s apparently naive Bhakti over Melpathoor Narayana Bhattathiri’s more scholarly and erudite ‘vibhakti.’

Melpathoor Narayana Bhattathiri (16<sup>th</sup> c. CE) was a reputed Sanskrit scholar. Like Ezhuthachan, Melpathur was also from Tirur. He composed the ‘Narayaneeyam.’ “The homestead of Melpathur has now been taken over by the Guruvayoor Devaswom. In these unkempt grounds a statue made of cement has been placed. Not far from here is the sandal wood grove that was dear to the author of Narayaneeyam” (Ravindran, 51).

Melpathoor Narayana Bhattathiri, was a student of Achyutha Pisharoti, a famous mathematician and astrologer of the Kerala school. Melpathur was also a mathematician, belonging to the Sangamagrama school. Achyuta Pisharoti, “also wrote a Malayalam commentary on Madhava’s ‘Venvaroha.’ His students include scholars like Melpattur Narayana Bhatta (a poet and grammarian).” (Joseph, 23) He was oriented towards the classical Sanskrit tradition while Poonthanam composed verses in accessible earthy Malayalam. Melpathoor’s works were imbued with Bhakti. But unfortunately, they were meant only for the upper echelons of the elite classes and scholars and were not accessible to laymen. The linguistic flux that existed in medieval times enabled Poonthanam to make a conscious choice based on his erudition and creative priorities.

The ‘Narayaneeyam’ by Melpathur,<sup>12</sup> composed in the 16<sup>th</sup> century is a devotee’s abridgement of the ‘Bhagavatha Purana’, a major bhakti text. The Bhagavatha is often considered, the fifth Veda, and the most significant purana which comprises the core text of Vishnu Bhakti. In a

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<sup>11</sup>It is interesting to note that Poonthanam Namboodiri, considered today as a major Bhakti poet, is given short shrift in many books on Malayalam literary history including those by Krishna Chaitanya and PK. Narayana Pillai.

<sup>12</sup>Malayalam poets often have the names of their households or places of birth/residence attached as prefixes to their names and might be known popularly as such.

baptismal foreshadowing of southern Bhakti movement, it was already prophesied in the 'Bhagavatha Purana' that major Vishnu bhaktas will emerge from the riparian regions of Tamraparni, Vaigai, Kaveri and Mahanadi. So did the major Alvar saints eventually, including Namma, Kulasekhara Perumal and Madhura Kavya Alvars. Interestingly, the prophecy in the Bhagavatha has been read counter-intuitively by Surendara Nath Dasgupta to posit that the Bhagavatha itself was a post-Alvar creation. While yogic philosophy envisages an emptying of the mind, 'Bhagavatha' exhorts the bhakta to imbue the mind with the thought of Krishna. The philosophical core of the Bhagavatham is Bhakti. A lighter version of the Bhagavatham, called 'Narayaneeyam' was composed in Sanskrit by Melpathur Bhattathiri, a contemporary of Ezhuthachan in Kerala in the 16th century. More folkish in nature, the Bhagavatha contains oral narratives mainly of Krishna and also other incarnations of Vishnu. Translated into French as early as 1840, the Bhagavatha could be considered the major text of Bhakti.

Vijay Nambisan who has translated both Poonthanam and Melpathur says that, "I have taken liberties with Punthanam. This is sometimes because the exact meaning would be obscure in English; sometimes because it would be irrelevant; and sometimes as I have said, laughable. Sometimes I have only been doing myself an act of kindness. Melpattur is very different. His poem is sung, of course, but-abiding correction-I should think it stands more as a literary work than as a popular song." (Nambisan, 39)

Those with a general understanding of Malayalam, and who were desirous of earning classical knowledge of the puranas mostly depended upon Ezhuthachan's Kilippattu and Stotras such as 'Harinama Keerthanam' and 'Bhagavatham' to quench their thirst for puranic knowledge. But the illiterate majority did not have that good fortune. It was at this juncture that Poonthanam entered into the fray. By using simple Malayalam accessible even to the illiterate, Poonthanam was able to attract a large number of people into the Bhakti fold. He is often called the first 'people's poet' of Kerala.

Poonthanam's lasting contribution is the recognition that he earned for poetry written in uncomplicated, unalloyed, simple Malayalam. 'Santhanagopalam Pana,' 'Jananappana,' 'Sreekrishna Karnamritham,' 'Noottettu Lahari,' 'Ghanasangham' were his major works.

He was a major exponent of the 'Pana' movement in Malayalam literature. Panakali was a literary performance associated with worship in Bhadrakali temples. The metre used to compose the verses for Panappattu was 'pana.'

Poonthanam recognised the potential of Pana metres for popularizing Bhakti. He started composing in the Pana metre. Rather than appropriating the more scholarly Sanskrit metres, a more popular local metre has been adopted. This was a political as well as creative decision taken by the poet. The linguistic ideology of the time was heavily loaded in favour of classical scholarship dominated by Sanskrit erudition.

It was Poonthanam of the late 16<sup>th</sup> century, one of the most lovable figures in Kerala's literary traditions, who missed Krishna with as great an anxious longing as Yasoda. In miniature hymn after hymn, he sought the dear infant till he could coax the child to race his poems with his live presence.

*In Vraja wanders an unruly kid,*

*There is a streak of mud on his round tummy.*

*The little man has a tiny flute*

*And he hugs a ball of butter with both his hands.*(Chaitanya, 129).

Poonthanam Namboodiri is thus one of the triumvirates of medieval bhakti,<sup>13</sup> though his output was not as copious as that of Ezhuthachan. Poonthanam Namboodiri is widely supposed to have composed the 'Kumaraharanam Pana.' It is also called 'Santhanagopalam.' It is about the misery of having progeny and is based on the 10<sup>th</sup> episode of the Bhagavatham.

The story is as follows, and might appear bigoted and casteist if not taken in its proper spiritual sense: While Lord Krishna was ruling over his kingdom of Dwarka, the first born child of a Brahman passed away. Seeking some sort of karmic justification for his son's demise, the child's father blamed the ruler for its demise. Thus in a scene evoking much pathos, the old man, bearing the corpse, reached Dwarka. The old man lamented in sorrow and abused Krishna. Unfortunately the old bereaved father's rantings and wailing and worry went unnoticed. The old man's wife conceived eight more times. All the eight sons tragically died in their infancy. This unfortunate sequence was thus repeated eight times. When the old man's ninth child too died, he

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<sup>13</sup>The other poets being Ezhuthachan and Cherusseri

again went to Dwarka and bewailed his misfortune and ranted at Krishna. But Krishna could not be directly appealed to as Krishna was away observing a yaga. Instead Arjuna, his friend was witness to the heartrending wails of the bereaved father. Arjuna took pity on him and gave his word to protect his tenth born child.

The Brahmin did not care much for that since he was not aware of who Arjuna was. Then Arjuna related to the Brahmin his valorous deeds to convince the Brahmin of his stature. Impetuously, Arjuna also made a rash promise of self-sacrifice. If unable to protect the tenth child, Arjuna pledged to enter fire. This ultimately did the trick and instilled confidence in the Brahmin and he intimated Arjuna as soon as his wife became pregnant again. Arjuna had to keep his promise. So Arjuna soon reached the Brahmin's abode and took guard and got ready to protect the baby from any impending misfortune by creating a shelter of arrows. But this proved to be of no avail. As soon as the Brahmin's wife delivered a child it died and entered the earth. Arjuna had failed. Just as he used to rant at Krishna, out of sorrow and anger, the Brahmin abused Arjuna.

Arjuna was also despondent over the old man's loss and his own failure to keep the promise given to the old man. Arjuna searched for the dead baby everywhere.<sup>14</sup> The child could not be found. To keep his word, he became ready to enter the fire. In order to save his friend, suddenly Krishna manifested himself. Both Krishna and Arjuna travelled to heaven or 'Vishnuloka.' There they recovered all the lost children of the Brahmin and returned them to him.

Arjuna had intended to use his valour and masculine vigour to retrieve the Brahmin's child and to protect them. But he miserably failed in his intention. Only Krishna's intervention saved the day and rescued the Brahmin's children and also Arjuna from a sacrificial death. Poonthanam makes the observation in 'Kumaraharanam Pana.' that: 'Sans Krishna's compassion, useless is manliness in humans.' Poonthanam has not made major deviations from the original Bhagavatham story. He has only recreated the tale. Only some slight variations have been made which are indicative of a parallax. They are:

In the Bhagavatham story of the Brahmin, the major character is Arjuna. It is he, the middle pandava, who gets involved in what essentially was Krishna's problem, and fails in that attempt

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<sup>14</sup> This searching has to be taken in its metaphysical sense thus including all the three worlds (earth, heaven, and nether world) and not in a spatial linear sense.

and gets ready to commit suicide. He always had succeeded thanks to his bosom friend Krishna. The aim of the ancient Bhagavatha poet was to arouse in him the feeling that sans Krishna he is null. Poonthanam on the other hand, in his 'Kumaraharanam Pana' has given the central attention to the bereaved Brahmin. This is the individual self in the Bhakti poem in relation to the deity. Poonthanam himself has written copiously of the pain and sorrow of bereavement since he himself had lost an infant in a tragic accident. So at an individual level Poonthanam was relating to the bereaved old father. He was working from a personal level and this was the strategy of Bhakti and Bhakti poetry.

Only the good life can salvage something from this endless flux. Poonthanam is no metaphysician and makes no attempt to give a complex definition of the good life. He does not need to, for the answer is clear to his heart. The good life is the life inspired by the love for all created things. This love springs from the mutual love of man and God, a love so great that God can consent to take the place of the lost infant to soothe the sorrow of the bereaved parents.

*When infant Krishna sports in my heart*

*Do I need others as mine own kids?(Chaitanya, 132).*

The Bhagavatham relates that the Brahmin brings the corpses of all ten children to Dwarka. Poonthanam makes a slight change to the story here. After bearing the corpse of the first child himself, the later deaths he simply announces in Dwarka. The corpses of the kids are not physically carried by him each time to Dwarka. The ninth time, he once again bears the child's corpse to Dwarka. It is only in the ninth instance that he abuses Krishna.

Poonthanam thus was not a translator of the Bhagavatham story, but was effectively transcreating the legend in his own idiom of Bhakti. He also makes the father the central character of the story and focuses on the pathos of paternal sorrow.

In the Bhagavatha story, the Brahmin's wife is never mentioned apart from some clues. In the 'Kumaraharanam Pana,' the Brahmin's wife, suspicious of Arjuna's promise asks of her husband several doubts in this regard. The various expressions of Arjuna about to enter the fire were later added on by Poonthanam.

Ultimately the episode is a panegyric to Krishna, and Krishna as deity is the central figure of Poonthanam's story. The liberties that the poet took are evident in other instances also such as the 'Vaikunta Darsanam' and 'Kumara Grahanam.' (Saraswati, 360).

It has often been suggested that the major bhava in 'Kumaraharanam' is bhakti. 'Kumaraharanam' is imbued with bhavas and among these bhavas, the major bhava is bhakti. Character development, use of metaphors within the matrix of devotion in 'Kumaraharanam' prove Poonthanam's poetic skill.

There is a section describing Vaikunta in the poem. That particular section shows signs of repeated editions proving it was written and rewritten many times. Poonthanam had never seen even an image of Vaikunta, as none were available in the Malabar of his day. That too is related to a dreamy vision that Poonthanam had. The dream is the realm of the nondifferentiated primordial Real. It is from here that the fount of bhakti sprouts. It takes recourse to language to express itself, but is essentially pre-linguistic.

Radical, mysterious changes are wrought by God. Within a week, fortune can float the beggar to the crest of the wave of prosperity and drag down the millionaire from his mansion to the alley of beggars. Though everything around them reminds men of the uncertainty of life and fortune they take no heed and pursue vain ambitions. The clever think they are wise and deny themselves the insights of real wisdom. Some take pride in their Brahminical birth, others seek power through the servile flattery of kings. The false identification of the self grows to mountainous enormity, egoism breeds like weeds and men fancy that the great world abides or changes thus because they will it thus. Bitter is this paradox:

*Vain desire continues to wax*

*Even as life goes on waning.*(Chaitanya, 132).

There are many legends surrounding the personality of Poonthanam. One legend says that he was a poetic rival of Melpathoor Narayana Bhattathiri who was a great Sanskrit scholar. Poonthanam's classical scholarship was comparatively patchy. Melpathoor used to find this amusing and always pointed it out to humiliate Poonthanam. Once Poonthanam was chanting a



prayer in praise of Padmanabha that ‘Padmanabho Amraprabhu’ meaning ‘Padmanabha is the immortal lord,’ yet it came out ‘Padmanabho Maraprabhu’ meaning ‘Padmanabha is the wooden Lord,’ ‘Maram’ meaning wood. Melpathoor immediately pointed out this mistake, and Poonthanam felt slighted. But suddenly a disembodied voice emerged from the sanctum sanatorium (supposedly the Lord’s) stating that ‘I am not only an Amraprabhu, but also a Maraprabhu.’ Even today the clay deity of the ‘Maraprabhu’ adorns the premises of the Guruvayoor temple in Northern Kerala, reputed to be the largest clay deity in Asia.

Legend has it that Poonthanam had a dreamy slumber while praying and in that prayer he had a vision of ‘Vaikunta’ which he simply copied for his poem. His description of Vishnu’s abode ‘Vaikunta’ is unparalleled.

There is another prevailing legend that an ailing Poonthanam in his later years, was unable to make the pilgrimage to Guruvayoor to pay obeisance to his favourite deity and hence the lord himself gave Poonthanam a personal private vision. And Poonthanam himself is said to have consecrated a temple and deity in commemoration of this miracle. It is through these legends and anecdotes that Poonthanam remains one of the most popular devotional poets of Kerala, perhaps second in stature only to Ezhuthachan. What appeals to most people is the simplicity of his philosophy and his felicity of verse sans any jargon.

How contemporary Poonthanam’s Bhakti still is was borne in upon me every day in the last three months of 2007, as I watched one of the most popular TV shows among Malayalis. It is a (ha,ha) reality show which spots singing talent, sponsored by one of the mobile phone companies, and the winner is determined partly by the number of SMS votes received. One of the best loved singers on this show last year was named Sannithanatham. He was by no means the best singer, nor the most charismatic. But when he sang devotional songs there was a fervour to his voice and persona which none of his fellows could match. (Nambisan, 40-41).

Another legend involving Poonthanam also revolves around the Krishna temple in Guruvayoor. One evening after the evening rituals at the temple were over, Poonthanam lingered around outside the closed doors of the temple. He was chanting the ‘namam’ or the divine name. As he was lost in his spiritual reverie, a young woman appeared out of nowhere. Her face was familiar

to Poonthanam. Yet she appeared distraught. As she approached nearer, Poonthanam was concerned about her state of anxiety. Poonthanam, no stranger to spiritual revelations could have turned this encounter also into one. But it was not meant to be. The woman was standing outside the temple door and somehow appeared heartbroken. So Poonthana mustered courage and approached her to enquire as to the cause of her sorrow. He asked her what her name was and why she appeared distraught. The woman's reply astonished Poonthanam, who himself was a deeply pious man.

The woman replied that it was part of her routine to make an oblation of a garland of tulsi (basil) leaves before lord Krishna at the temple and that she had been doing that for her entire living life. But on that day due to particular circumstances she was not able to make her routine offering. She was busy performing her household duties and as she rushed to the temple. It was later than the evening puja and the temple was closed. Hence she was in her present heartbroken condition. After explaining her sorrow, she started crying and appealed to Poonthanam (who was a priest due to his vocational, caste status) to provide some sort of succour to her spiritual disarray. Ever since childhood the woman had been making the offering of the garland to Guruvayoorappan (Krishna) and missing it even for a day was unthinkable for her. Poonthanam remained in meditation for a few moments and then suggested a solution. He suggested that she while remaining in a meditative state and contemplating the image of Krishna in her mind, offer the garland at the foot of a nearby Banyan tree. Poonthanam insisted that the offering will be accepted by the Lord. The woman offered the garland at the foot of the nearby banyan tree. The very next morning, as the chief priest of the temple opened the temple doors, he found a fresh garland draped around the deity. The garland of basil leaves appeared fresh. This astonished the priest. He then tried to remove the garland from the idol, but in vain. The garland remained stuck to the idol. Poonthanam as usual was nearby chanting 'namam.' So the priest sought the help of Poonthanam.

Poonthanam replied that the garland belonged to the woman and she alone could remove it from the idol. Poonthanam advised the priest to remove the garland thinking of it as belonging to a woman named Manjula. And the priest did so. In this story we obtain some inklings to the state of gender relations in medieval Kerala, the spiritual status that could be attained by women in bhakti devotion, was higher vis-a-vis their household roles.

Poonthanam thus has a lyrical and anecdotal presence in Malayalam literary history. “The historical anecdote functions less as explanatory illustration than as a disturbance, that which requires explanation, contextualization, interpretation.” (Greenblatt, 5)

The ‘karmayogi’ aspect of Krishna, is foregrounded in the instance of Poonthanam’s celebrated ‘Kumaraharanam.’ The focal point in the poem is undoubtedly Sri Krishna. But paradoxically, in Poonthanam’s version, he appears only towards the very end of the story. But he is an invisible presence throughout the story. Krishna had to rush to the aid of his devotee Arjuna.

Poonthanam is a master craftsman in his use of metaphors. His similes remind us of Kalidasa. ‘Upama Kalidasasya’ becomes ‘Upama Poonthanasya.’ Some of the relevant examples highlighting Poonthanam’s masterful use of tropes are his contrasting of an elephant and a ‘burrow elephant’, a tiny insect (called ‘Kuzhiyana’ in Malayalam, meaning a burrow elephant). The famous comparison of angst ridden eyes to burning embers is also derived from Poonthanam. He later compares a man in distress to a fawn trapped in a forest fire.

Poonthanam uses lay sayings and proverbs using animal metaphors like the Panchathantra and much in the vein of later Bhakti poets. Animals and creatures like canines and lizards are topics for his tropes, which are simple in their structure yet epic in their affective capability.

The eternal repose of Vishnu is called Ananthasayanam by Bhakti poets. While describing Ananthasayanam of Vishnu, Poonthanam almost comes close to and matches Ezhuthachan in his poetic capabilities. There are also some other instances where the influence of Ezhuthachan on the writing of Poonthanam are evident.

Poonthanam also deploys folk wisdom, proverbs, phrases etc. to add spice to his compositions. For example, Poonthanam says that the house lizard thinks that it holds aloft the walls of the house. Similarly pompous people think that everything revolves around them and their very existence is the locus of all. Such simple metaphors drawn from every day household and agrarian life are unimaginable in the oeuvre of classical Sanskrit poets of lesser calibre like Melpathoor Narayana Bhattathiri.

It is believed that ‘Santhanagopalam Pana’ was Poonthanam’s first work. It also deals with the heartbreak associated with the loss of a child, which was something Poonthanam himself experienced in his life.

Poonthanam and his wife were issueless long after their wedding. The couple was desirous of having a baby. After much propitiation of Gods, a child was born to Poonthanam and unfortunately the infant died in a freak accident during its naming ceremony. This made Poonthanam sorrowful and he lost all taste for worldly life and he turned inward. It opened his inner eye or so is it said. An inner fire of Bhakti and devotion was kindled in Poonthanam. He wrote the ‘Santhanagopalam’ and other poems in the Pana style lamenting the fleeting nature of this worldly life and pleasures much in the vein of Ezhuthachan in his ‘Adhyatma Ramayanam.’

It is with the incidence of tragic experience that this type of musing on the world and life gains poignancy. Poonthanam illustrates this. He had devoted the last section of the ‘Karnamritam’ to a philosophical meditation on life. There are valid perceptions here, but it is clear that the exploration is done by the intellect, not the heart. Then unexpectedly, tragedy came into the life of this gentle, lovable man. His little child died by suffocation quite by accident. The old thoughts wing back into the ‘Song of Illumination’ he wrote in this moment of truth, of personal experience of the tragic. But they are now greatly transformed. He sees the utter transience and uncertainty of life.

*Uncertain it was that the length of days  
Would reach out to this morrow; unknown  
What fate tomorrow would bring  
Or how long this body would hold together.  
Those busily alive, right in our midst,  
Overnight cease to be, by the mystery of Thy will. (Chaitanya, 132).*

Poonthanam became a ‘vairagi’ or ‘virakta’ renouncing worldly pleasure and turned himself to the composition of devotional ditties in praise of Lord Krishna. As a poet he was inclined towards the mystical and devotional streams of poetry. It was thus that he came to compose the famous verse that goes: ‘while the infant Krishna dances in one’s heart, do you need other children of your own?’

The naive, immediate and facile way of expression of devotion characteristic of Poonthanam's simple style of poetry written in the local dialect is often at odds with the searing intensity of his lived experience and the trauma of his loss. This parallax is at work throughout the medieval Bhakti poetry of Kerala.

The human psyche has many dimensions. Yet we are seeing only one facet of it in our daily lives. Sanskrit poetry and literature, like much of classical scholarship can bring out only unilinear aspects of devotion in a single dimension. The aim of the Bhakti poet is to provide a holistic outlook from this fragmentary experience. Varied facets of human psyche, whether religious, pious, devotional, erotic, seductive, or incantatory are symbolized in concrete images within the realm of Bhakti.

Bhakti poets like Poonthanam and Ezhuthachan reveal other dimensions and aspects of the psyche hitherto hidden and unknown and thus reveal their humanity in their fullness. It is this quality of their humanity which when juxtaposed with the devotional divinity and expressed in such profound yet simple local dialects that imparts an enduring quality to much of their Bhakti devotional poetry.

Even though 'Santhanagopalam Pana' is often considered to be the very first work of Poonthanam Namboodiri, the maturity of his later style can be discerned even in this early work. 'Kumaraharanam Pana' is considered his masterpiece.

In his later years, Poonthanam composed a sort of panegyric which he called the 'Bhashakarnamrtam.' The very title of the poem is loaded with preferential linguistic connotations. Bhasha could also mean a translation from Sanskrit into the vernacular 'bhasha'. An analysis of the title reveals Poonthanam's ideology and the prevailing linguistic scenario. The title literally means elixir for the years composed in the local dialect. 'Bhasha' in the title refers to the local dialect, an evolutionarily early form of Malayalam.

Similarly there have been other Bhasha works like the 'Bhasha Ramayanam,' 'Bhasha Bharatham' and other similar works. The term 'Bhasha' posits itself as belonging to local milieu contrasting itself from the classical and more upper-class elitist Sanskrit. Bhasha refers to Malayalam. Semantically the term 'Bhasha' means 'language.'

This description of Malayalam as a generic term, is a minimalistic, mundane, one that gives itself an aura of everyday use and domesticity. Hence Malayalam means language, and language means Malayalam. Sanskrit is the language of the gods, belonging to another realm altogether.

The term Bhasha refers at once to the inferior status of Malayalam as well as to its position as a robust lingo of the masses and not the elites. By referring to his work as 'Bhasha' and adding the prefix 'Bhasha', it means that the poet is situating the work in the strata of commonly read and enjoyed devotional works, and not among the scholarly and more erudite texts composed in Sanskrit.

The poet in Poonthanam might prefer the Malayalam language over Sanskrit due to reasons of creative affinity. But the politician in Poonthanam is referring to more erudite scholars of Sanskrit like Melpathoor Narayana Bhattathiri for whom alone the classical language poetry of Sanskrit was accessible to compose in. Poonthanam is trying to deflect such scholarly attacks on his devotional poem centred on Bhakti, by declaring in its title itself its moorings in the local non-elitist, non-hierarchical dialect called 'ruby and coral' or otherwise also called 'Malayalam.'

Poonthanam's 'Karnamritham' is no miniature. It has grown into a long narrative poem of about one hundred and sixty quatrains which tells again the story of the tenth canto of the Bhagavata. But the whole piece manages to read like one short, flowing lyric through its manner which is no literary mannerism but sincerely reflects the nostalgic eagerness of the seeking heart. For every episode is recalled through moistened eyes with the muted query when he would ever see that scene again or the prayer that he may be granted the favour to see the scene at least in his dreams. (Chaitanya, 129)

'Karnamritham' refers to the elixir part of the auditory experience derived from listening to puranas, itihisas, and kavyas etc of classical provenance in one's own local dialect of Malayalam. The sweetness of the mother tongue pervades the poem. It is implied that the local language of the populace, though not high in pomp and splendour like Sanskrit, has a more mellifluous effect on the corporeal ear.

Here the poet enters the realm of the debate between the idealist (non-corporeal) and the materialist (corporeal) spheres. The poet stresses on the corporeal material nature of the human ear which is open to native 'ruby and coral' or Malayalam notes and words, rather than to the

grammatically rigid Sanskrit. The inherent partiality of the prevailing linguistic ideology towards the classical Sanskrit is thus deconstructed firstly by using a ‘ruby and coral’ dialect combining Sanskrit vocabulary with Dravidian writing styles and custom and context and pronunciation.

Secondly, the supremacy of the classical Sanskrit hierarchical structure is challenged by using the very same stories and devotional content as the Sanskrit sources and lacing them with Bhakti having local resonances and often invoking local deities.

The use of the term ‘amritam’ or ‘elixir’ also suggests notions of moksha from the worldly labyrinth which is a release devoutly wished for by Bhakti poets and devotees and Bhakti saints, often the three coalescing into one. The title also hints at the direct immediacy with the deity that the Bhakti poem brings to the reader or listener of the poem. In contrast to this, the classical epics and kavyas are not accessible in an intensely emotional and intense manner to a lay audience. The ideational content of much of medieval Bhakti making it soar over everyday concerns, is muted down by the use of Malayalam dialects in common use, thus bringing it down to the level of everyday domesticity.

It is also significant to note that the ‘Bhashakarnamrtam’ is supposed to be the first poem written in praise of Sri Krishna in the ‘ruby and coral’ literary dialect.

‘Jnanappana’ or ‘the song of wisdom’ is widely supposed to be Poonthanam’s masterpiece. While deviating from the Sanskrit-centric matrix of medieval cosmopolis, Poonthanam at the same time is attaching himself to a long and age old tradition.

In the engulfing wheel of samsara  
Dreary folks for us to know  
Wise great people  
Have uttered the eternal truth  
To attain mukthi easily  
Lend your ears all of you. (Namboodiri, Poonthanam, 24).

Here Poonthanam harks back to a continuum of tradition that goes all the way back to the times when the Vedas were composed. And it is the prerogative of the ‘wise’ sages, to propound on the reality of life and the ways to attain ‘mukthi’ or moksha. The idea behind these verses becomes

easier to glean once Poonthanam's harking back to an idyllic vedic past full of wisdom is juxtaposed to the emerging new language called Malayalam in which he has chosen to compose his lines. The evocation of the corporeal ear is also noteworthy for its repudiation of an idealistic and non-corporeal Sanskrit tradition. The ease of the attainment of moksha is also projected as one of the incentives of following the path of Bhakti according to Poonthanam. The wheel of samsara is a metaphor that uses the cyclic law of birth, death and rejuvenation and rebirth, concisely within a Bhakti framework. Poonthanam describes the vaulting ambition of human beings thus:

If one gains ten, he desires a hundred  
And if one gains a hundred, desires thousand,  
And when the thousand materializes,  
Even that doesn't suffice surprisingly,  
Desire is a rope and without letting go of it  
One beaches repeatedly all the while. (Namboodiri, Poonthanam142).

Rather than a single linear path of birth, death, and rebirth, Poonthanam looks at human beings as beaching again and again, on the banks of life till they attain moksha, all the while clamouring for material wealth in multiples of ten. The little multiplication table in the first three lines of the poem becomes an interesting trope to take a dig at the idealist predilections and mathematical formalism of much of Sanskrit poetry. In the meantime, Poonthanam is also paying homage to great mathematicians of yore like Aryabhata, Bhaskaracharya, Varahamihira, Kanada etc even while taking care not to venture beyond the naive and simple idiom of much of bhakti poetry.

Interestingly, Poonthanam compares desire or 'moha' to a rope. From the idealistic terrain of speculative mathematics and algebra, Poonthanam moves to the more materialistic realm in his evocation of the rope.

Though the rope is equated with desire and hence there is a negative connotation thus implied, the reader is caught in a double bind, because the rope can be a tool of tyranny, shackling the creative powers and at the same time in a noirish manner it can be a last ditch hope for victims to cling on to, since life itself is being compared to a bridge made of ropes, and the role of desire itself is constitutive. It has to be noted that the rope-making industry in Kerala during medieval times was flourishing with the advent of the Dutch and Portuguese and the development of



maritime trade relations with other parts of the world. The coiled nature of the rope and the image of the serpent 'Kaliya' whom Krishna banished from the river Yamuna, is subliminally evoked by Poonthanam. The human lifespan seen from a cyclical worldview is encapsulated in this stanza by Poonthanam.

The inability of human beings to escape from the sea of troubles or 'samsara' by themselves, without the help of a redeeming ideology or guru, forms the crux of Poonthanam's argument. They either need a local tradition of their own (little) or a grand classical tradition (great) to fall back on.

The quickening of the pulse of life is captured by Poonthanam in the multiplying stressed syllables of the stanza. The pattern formed is a mystical key to understand the way to moksha that lies in the esoteric and yet easily accessible and immediate realm of Bhakti poetry and devotion. Poonthanam also implies that with advanced age, the human desire for wealth only multiplies. Poonthanam also says in an adjacent couplet that;

At the time of death, even the clothes

Each of us, we cannot take along. (Namboodiri, Poonthanam143).

Poonthanam here uses the lowly, base term 'chathu' for death. It is his way of saying death be not proud. And it is implied that the wealth is earned by abusing and harassing friends and family as well as society at large. This is the same parallax which is operation between the Norman 'porque' and Anglo-Saxon 'pig'.

Incredible though it might seem, the worldview of Poonthanam, though ascetic and renunciatory, contains shades of corporeality and enjoyment. It has to be noted that among the three major Bhakti poets of medieval Kerala, viz. Ezhuthachan, Poonthanam, and Cherusseri, it was Poonthanam Nambudiri who unequivocally stated the ideology of Bhakti in his works. His poetry is tinged with pathos, whereas the poetry of Ezhuthachan is laced with pure devotion and the poetry of Cherusseri Nambudiri has shades of the 'sringara' or erotic rasa.

Simplicity is Poonthanam's forte. Poonthanam brings the simplicity of his devotion to the content and craft of his poems also. He states his theme of renunciation and that of uselessness of worldly pomp, power and pleasure bluntly and without much embellishment. He says that

‘human beings do not bring anything with them on birth, and they do not take away anything with them when they die. In the time that we spend in between these two events, why compete meaninglessly?’

Poonthanam also says that ‘it is the lord who makes the mansion-dweller into a beggar and it is the same lord who in a day or two gives someone power and pride.’ He compares every breath to a small chunk taken away from the lifespan of the human.

The fleetingness and ephemerality and the pointlessness of competitiveness are captured with existential intensity in the words of Poonthanam. But at the same time his lines are those of simple devotion and have none of the scholarly sophistication of Ezhuthachan or the rustic charm of Cherusseri. Poonthanam is also the most subjective of the three poets. Poonthanam’s own personal tragedy, the birth of a son after much propitiation and the tragic death of the infant, propelled the poet toward ‘vairagya’ or renunciation. This spirit is evident throughout his oeuvre and can be understood completely only in conjunction with the personal life and tragedy of Poonthanam. Whereas Ezhuthachan gives over to Rama and Cherusseri self-abnegates to foreground the glory of Krishna, in Poonthanam, the humble devotee is ever present and it is only through the simplicity and selflessness and utter lack of selfishness or ego of his devotion that we can glimpse at Krishna his lord.

Sanskrit idioms and ideas were copiously used by Ezhuthachan and his works need some facility with Sanskrit and literary Malayalam to be comprehensively grasped. Cherusseri on the other hand scandalized his contemporaries by using rural idioms and slangs and local scenery in his ‘Krishnagadha.’ Poonthanam did not take either of these stands. His language and idiom of expression are simple sans any agenda. Poonthanam did not seek to confound his audience with his scholarship and verbal dexterity. But in hindsight it is this very simplicity of Poonthanam’s verse that appeals to the modern readership. He could even be said to be a precursor to the later romantic poets in Kerala.

Count by count decreases lifespan  
And trudges ahead desires  
Onam arrives, Vishu departs,  
Thiruvathira is not yet here

In the month of Kumbha is my birthday  
And under star of Aswathy  
I have partaken of the sraddha rite in Vrcchika  
There is no lack of funeral feasts  
A child was born, it got married and  
Thus a grandchild was born unto me. (Namboodiri, Poonthanam151).

In this rather long passage Poonthanam again takes us to the cyclical nature of life and to astrology and to the speculation that human beings are playthings for a higher intelligence. He mentions that he was born in the month of Aswathy in the Malayalam era and in the adjacent month of Vrschika (when the Ramayana is widely read and which is generally a month of hardship for an agrarian people) he partook of a funeral feast or 'Sraddham' which is a rite of propitiation of ancestor spirits.

The funereal season for Poonthanam is dotted with the major festivals of Kerala such as Onam and Vishu. Therefore, paradoxically, the astrological sign under which he was born is juxtaposed with a milieu of death, and the season of festivities with that of funereal rites.

The incorporation of ritual with the celestial bodies and human destinies and rites produces the quintessential Bhakti rasa, which is based on the parallax of irresolution into distinct threads or strands of linear thought.

Why mention so much, when  
There is enough to think for everyone  
The magnitude of their Karma in each  
Birth and many that have passed before.  
The age today is that of Kali, and  
The size of the landmass of Bharat  
And coming to take birth there  
And lost was the way in similar fashion,  
There is no assuredness for life  
And also to healthy state of being  
Today with the chanting of songs

Will be attained purushartha  
Now the fear of hell, directed  
Towards that should be thoughts. (Namboodiri, Poonthanam153).

Poonthanam in these lines foregrounds the importance of ‘thought’ as a category. The karmic law that accrues life after life is also stressed upon. But the age being that of Kali is not propitious to the normal progression of good karma. Also significant is the size of the landmass of India.

Given the magnitude and proportions of such a gigantic landmass and its populace, whether the birth, death and rebirth of a single human being will be noted or remembered is Poonthanam’s concern. The shortness of the human lifespan and even within that short duration, the paucity of good health is a hampering factor for the Bhakti poet in Poonthanam whose only solace is the chanting of the songs (‘sangeerthanams’) in praise of Krishna. Strategies to avoid a hellish fate occupy his energies.

‘Poorva avastha’ or earlier states is stressed upon by Poonthanam. The vairagya or renunciatory cathexis is attained by the poet in view of his previous life as well as with an eye of future moksha. Action or ‘karma’ is given prominence in this worldview. The actions of the previous life and the karmic effects thus have an effect on kindling of the enlightenment of the Bhakti poet. It is this kindling of spiritual energies that channels the creative energies towards Bhakti. Creativity and Bhakti are in this sense intertwined.

We are not together at birth  
We are not together at death  
In the midst of this time  
Why do we compete thus in vain? (Namboodiri, Poonthanam57).

These are arguably the most famous lines written by Poonthanam. Human beings are alone, without company, before their birth and after their death. The provenance of human life is mystically explained. Human beings are among their compatriots or ‘sahajeevis’ only during their time on this earth and that too during their lifetime. Hence competition among each other in terms on wealth, status, scholarship etc is merely in vain. Poonthanam thus posits human life as a path marked by a beginning and end where human beings live in commingled enjoyment of their short lives on earth.

It is the futility of the competition that appals Poonthanam and not the quality of that competition. Here he rises above the mere division of caste, creed and colour.

Wealth? While the wealth of Purushartha exists  
Should one care for worldly wealth?  
As the midday sun burns bright,  
Should one mind the mere firefly? (Namboodiri, Poonthanam157).

Here Poonthanam indulges in some clever wordplay between the twin meanings of the term 'artha.' Artha could mean wealth it can also mean purushartha. It is within this parallax of meaning that Poonthanam works out his ideology of renunciation or vairagya Bhakti. From the point of view of a worldly person, material wealth and possessions is what artha stands for. For the enlightened ascetic or the Bhakti poet, it means sense.

This meaning can be found in philosophy, devotion and renunciation. Hatred and love become forms of competition in this parallax. The feeling of love derives from one particular point of view, whereas the feeling of hatred derives from the same stimulus when observed from a different perspective. Death and birth are also separated by the same parallax. The origin and the end of life are the same in a cyclical series of births and rebirths for the mystic.

A life elapses from heaven  
And is born in hell as demon king  
When he of lowly deeds expires  
Is born in lowly fashion  
Asuras are born as suras (gods)  
The immortals are born as mere trees  
The sheep dies and is reborn as an elephant  
The wolf dies and is reborn as a man  
A woman dies and is reborn  
The cruel man who tortures others  
Dies and is reborn as a mere worm  
A fly dies and is reborn as a feline  
These are the mere play of the lord. (Namboodiri, Poonthanam 67).

Here Poonthanam turns to the realm of rebirth itself. A hierarchy of Karmic salvation is established. This generally follows the ‘varnashrama dharma.’

But Poonthanam also says that demons can turn into gods. So it is possible for the subterranean classes by virtue of good deeds to climb up the karmic chain. This is exemplified in Poonthanam in seemingly naive fashion by invoking animal examples and parables. But the organic continuity that Poonthanam invokes is not one of violent triumphalism, but rather one of salvation through karmic virtue. Poonthanam’s intention here is that people should be given a Karmic leeway instead of judging them so that the apparently lowly person can also attain Karmic exaltitude.

By the propitiation of Krishna, even those who are demons (asuras) can turn divine. On the other hand, even the eternal gods can turn into motionless trees. Here Poonthanam indulges in some wordplay involving ‘amara,’ meaning eternal and ‘maram’ which means tree.

The ideology of Poonthanam is anti-static and one that follows the law of change, which remains a constant.

After much effort, in mother’s  
Womb you fall, know this  
Ten months are lost in the womb  
Ten to twelve years are lost in childhood  
The rest is spent in pride and  
Thus wasted without knowing oneself. (Namboodiri, Poonthanam116)

Thus, during this life itself it is possible for humans to go through a cycle of karmic eventualities, that include spending ten months in the mother’s womb and around twelve years as a child. Nearly half of human life is spent in darkness and sleep. The rest of the human lifespan, Poonthanam claims is spent in mere wasteful pride. The progression from infancy to childhood to adulthood has to be marked by the awakening of a new consciousness.

Poonthanam here subtly conveys through the evocation of the human gestation period the many desires that expecting women are supposed to be prone to. These desires are attributed to the new life that is gestating. Childhood and infancy are two periods of great significance to Bhakti

poetry, since these are the stages when the human organism is supposed to be closest to its pristine state of innocence.

Krishna is worshipped in his infant state as well as adulthood. But there is also the hint that childhood is often wasted due to an excess of the ludic or playful element that lacks any sort of seriousness. Though the acquisition of education is the most advisable thing for youngsters at this stage, Poonthanam hints at a general lack of enthusiasm for knowledge acquisition compared to other fleshly and worldly pursuits.

The term that Poonthanam uses for the gestation period and childhood is 'poyi' or 'lost.' Thus even though the foetus might be slightly cognizant of its previous birth, that life is lost in taking on this new one. Each incarnation is a painting over of a previous one in what forms a palimpsest of Karma.

Therefore moksha and freedom derives not from nonchalance or automatic salvation, but through conscious effort. Therefore the karmic and dharmic laws have to be assimilated, if possible from childhood itself, according to Poonthanam's perception of Bhakti.

There is a foregrounding of youth as the perfect stage in life to acquire self-knowledge and good karma. But this is exactly the time when human beings are buffeted by the winds of 'kama.' So Poonthanam goes back to the concept that the human life is a 'gift' to be carefully savoured.

Poonthanam also rues that human beings waste their lives without chanting the divine name.

In this body like a water bubble  
It is to be seen as a swelling  
Not knowing this and full of trouble  
It will get squeezed  
In that fleeting life  
Nobody praises the divine name. (Namboodiri, Poonthanam126).

The fleeting nature of the human body is compared by Poonthanam to a bubble of water. Water is a fluid, much like the lifespirt that traverses from birth to rebirth. One's reflection can be seen in this bubble of water. When the water bubble moves, it seems that the reflected image is also moving, though in reality the human might be standing still. Similarly, the water bubble could

burst, annihilating the image along with it, even as the source remains. Similarly, the human body alone is prone to destruction, while the soul or the atman remains alive and constant. Human beings take breath continuously to survive. The water bubble is also filled with the same air. Thus the simile here is relevant.

Much of the human troubles on earth derive from not understanding that the atman or the soul is indestructible. The atman is the eternal Brahman. Not knowing this we spend our time on earth in futile efforts to sustain ourselves. That is because we are tangled in the web of maya. The illusion of maya creates the web where human beings merely fight among themselves and ignore the eternal and constant principle of the atman. In a previous stanza, Poonthanam ridicules the human frailty which yearns for 100 when it obtains ten.

Imagery from the realm of traditional healing system of Ayurveda are close to Poonthanam's heart. He uses the image of a traditional healer who tries many herbs without understanding the underlying cause of the symptom, thus causing the patient to expire. This must be seen in the context of the robust eco-system of herbal medicine that existed in medieval Kerala and which followed a heterodox norm which allowed people from across caste barriers to practise the healer's craft.

Fighting over pomp and power  
Losing face loiter folks  
Thinking ever more competitively  
Losing themselves thus some  
Visiting houses of the flickering-eyed  
Make themselves into simpletons some  
Being servants to big houses  
Act pompously some others  
By doing priestly chores and  
Work till twilight some others.  
Not their mother, father, wife  
Feed some other folks.  
Others don't see their fire-witnessed wife  
Even in their dreams



When approached with an eye on wealth  
Anger like enemies others  
While seeing the respected  
Act disrespectful some others.  
Look it is through our speech alone  
That this world itself exists, opine some.  
Jumping high in pride of caste  
Some think they are equals to Brahma.  
To make come true desire for wealth  
Some perform fire rituals and the like  
Others sell gold and gems  
Beyond numbers in this manner. (Namboodiri, Poonthanam131).

Human beings fight about their status in society and power and the loss of face in public. They are eternally in competition with each other over petty matters. They are often lewd and lascivious. These folks Poonthanam calls ‘simpletons.’

Some caretakers of big households also act pompously. Here Poonthanam takes a dig at them through sarcasm. But his sarcasm is not brutal or coruscating. It is gentle sarcasm.

Poonthanam also valorises the work of priests who work from dawn to dusk. There are other virtueless folks who would not feed their parents or spouse. Those who are wealthy are extremely jealous of their possessions. Others are disrespectful to monks and others deserving of their respect. This also comes in for Poonthanam’s criticism.

Poonthanam also critiques caste pride. Those who are Brahmins have become too proud and also consider themselves equal to Brahma himself. There are people who perform rituals in order to acquire wealth. In this lengthy passage, Poonthanam dwells on status anxiety of human beings. His social critique is directed at caste pride, social hierarchy, wanton greed, ambition, status anxiety and other social ills.

Sarcasm is a trope used by Poonthanam to reinforce the Bhakti credentials of his poetry. He brings alive the medieval Kerala society with its hierarchies, caste-based divisions, temple rituals, financial setup, and division of labour between the working, landed and priestly classes.

Poonthanam even broaches upon the status of women in medieval Kerala, when he satirises men who view women as objects for their enjoyment and pleasure. In this manner Poonthanam deploys the spirit of Bhakti and his poetic craft in order to throw light upon the fissures that were eating into the edifice of Kerala society in the medieval period.

The ideal theatre for medieval Kerala was the theatre of Bhakti with the flexibility that it afforded within the matrix of traditionally received ideas. In such a milieu Poonthanam wasted no opportunity in decrying the blatant abuse of wealth and caste power by those who were in a dominating position in medieval Kerala society.

The presence of other faiths is not mentioned by Poonthanam, but there are hints that his spirituality is more locally inspired than Sanskritic.

Born in hundreds of wombs  
How much Karma might have the soul had?  
Children, spouses, wealth and relatives  
Too might have passed into the crores?  
Daily for the sake of household governance  
Earned illegal wealth to himself  
I did not keep remembrance of Vishnu  
Nor did i chant Krishna, Krishna.  
The result of all these thus  
I suffer at this point rightly  
From the womb to the outside  
Should I have emerged capable?  
I do not perform bad karma  
All my karma has been good too.  
I have not worshipped anyone  
Other than Narayana Swami himself  
Thinking on similar lines i started  
Panegyrics of the lord. (Namboodiri, Poonthanam59).

Here Poonthanam touches upon the continuity of life that is organic and also the karmic deeds that one performs. A transformation has been effected on the person after countless births and rebirths and after passing through hundreds of wombs, and acquiring wealth as well as relatives in numbers running into millions.

The effect of all this has been that the chanting and remembrance of Vishnu's divine name has been forgotten. This lacunae was made up for later in life with karmic grace when the chanting of 'Narayana' was resumed. The act of writing praises of the divine deity is foregrounded by the poet. Only after the resumption of the chanting of the divine name, has cosmic salvation been attained by the poet. The utterance of the divine name is thus the basis for attainment of moksha. The writing of these verses also comes close to the chanting of the divine name. In this fashion, the poet lays down a code for attainment of moksha that includes both reading (chanting) and writing. Thus the performance of piety alone brings moksha. The poet later explains the significance of the divine name:

Listen to the greatness of the divine name  
That should invoke penitence in us  
Even though born rather lowly  
Or even if he be Mahishasur himself  
All human beings exempting those  
Who were born mute, tongueless,  
Should chant daily atleast one  
Among the countless divine names  
While sitting calm and idle  
Or even while dreaming unconsciously  
Taking it for something else  
Or for the sake of others  
While inhabiting anywhere  
To chant with one's own tongue  
Or during any time of the day  
To listen to it with one's ear  
Brings fulfilment of one's birth purpose

And obtain eternal salvation  
Sreedharacharya has said this, and  
So did Badri Narayana. (Namboodiri, Poonthanam175).

Here in these verses also the significance of the chanting of the 'namam' or the divine name is stressed upon. It can be unconscious, dreamy, vicarious overhearing, or for the sake of others, whatever the cause might be, chanting of the divine name brings eternal salvation.

The corporeality of the tongue is emphasised since one who is in possession of one must chant the divine name.

The deity is eternal and segues into the elements. Hence the instantiation of the divine deity by the invocation of its name is significant. It is through name alone that human beings are able to identify the deity. The naming of the deity is multiple. It can be through listening or speaking. The invocation of the deity can also be multifarious. It can either be during state of consciousness or dream.

The birth that derives through thousands of births and rebirths can be fulfilled only through chanting of the divine name. The entire lifespan of the human being that lasts nearly sixty something years comes down to the moment when the name of Krishna is chanted. Thus the perpetuation of organic life through births and rebirths coincides with the perpetuation of the divine through chanting the 'nama,' or the name. In this respect the poet invokes the names of Sreedharacharya and Badri Narayana, two great scholars.

Here it is interesting to note that Poonthanam adopts a self-deprecating tone towards himself. His lines have to be buttressed with regard to their authenticity by invoking these scholars. Poonthanam being a 'bhasha' writer or poet in Malayalam local dialect lacks the authenticity of the traditional Sanskrit scholar.

It is in this context that the names of Sreedharacharya and Badri Narayana are invoked. The tradition of Bhakti is also established. Bhakti though not belonging to a Sanskrit great tradition, also goes back to the time when Krishna tells Arjuna to be his devotee: 'Bhavo Madbhakto.' The multiple names of the deity are to be chanted in the local dialect 'bhasha' itself and confirmation for this is being sought from Sanskrit sources.

The variety of linguistic proliferation during the medieval times has often been broached upon. In such a context, the use of multiple languages is other than Sanskrit is valid since the deity itself is multiple in nature. The deity is eternal and is merely invoked by the chanting of the name in multiple dialects including Malayalam.

Poonthanam also chooses not to invoke the name of his contemporary and much acclaimed Sanskrit scholar Melpathoor Narayana Bhattathiri who composed the celebrated 'Narayaneeyam' in Sanskrit. Chanting of the divine name, that alone is the way to eternal salvation. Poonthanam leaves out his competitor and harasser out of the ambit of eternal salvation to be derived from infinite chanting of the name of Krishna.

The nature of Krishna is compared to the ideal. But it is multiple. There are multiple languages which are being used to chant his name and its multiplicity is vindicated.

Up and down trudging thus lives  
From earth earn their karmas  
Sans boundaries many karmas  
From the earth inherit living beings,  
Thus doing, when they die  
In other worlds, each one of them  
Reach and exist these lives;  
And expires this a little further ahead  
And then returns to earn even more. (Namboodiri, Poonthanam74)

Here Poonthanam traces the karmic network of lineages. While joylessly trudging the earth during their base existence, human beings earn their karmas, good and bad. There are not limits to the extent of this inheritance.

But the poet envisions the universe as a karmic causeway with many intersections. People die in one world and are reborn in another. They earn wealth and extinguish it and then go and seek wealth again. Here 'world' refers to the landmass of India and is an indicator of Poonthanam's knowledge of the extended globe.

In those days Poonthanam was aware of other landmasses outside India and the existence of human beings in them, whom he joins through the karmic thread. People who live in the landmass of India expire and are reborn in another land (which is cause for lamentation) and continue their acquisition of material wealth and wellbeing there also. In this manner the futility of the cycle of births and rebirths is emphasized.

Of the four yugas, prominent is Kali  
To obtain moksha easily, chant  
Krishna!Krishna!Mukunda Janardhana!  
Krishna Govinda Rama, thus  
The singing of the divine names  
Is better than all other efforts  
Thus thinking people of the  
Other thirteen worlds  
And of those six other islands  
Since moksha is not possible for them  
Bow in respect before the landmass  
Of Bharat in kaliyuga  
To be born there in this period  
Even as a blade of grass  
To attain to that state  
We were not lucky enough Lord!  
For those born in the landmass of Bharat  
We bow before the people and the age of Kali  
Thus praise us the others,  
Why broach more about this ourselves? (Namboodiri, Poonthanam38).

Though Kaliyuga is considered the basest of the four yugas, (Kritha, Tretha, Dwapara, Kali), according to Poonthanam it is the most prominent among the four. The depravity of the age of Kali is so much that the mere chanting of the name of the Lord is sufficient to grant one moksha. It is because of this reason that Poonthanam valorises the age of Kali and not owing to its negative qualities. It is a time that is at odds with itself, with knots or eddies present in the temporal flow.

## **Krishnagadha-Cherusseri Namboodiri**

Cherusseri Namboodiri's 'Krishnagadha' composed in the 'Manjari' metre is widely popular for the simplicity of its language and for the intensity of its sentiment of Bhakti. Cherusseri lived in the 15<sup>th</sup> c. CE in Northern Kerala. He was born into a Namboodiri household, belonging to the highest echelons of Brahminhood. He says in his verse that he wrote the 'Krishnagadha' at the instigation of Udaya Varma who ruled Kolathunad in Northern Kerala between 1446 and 1475. According to K.Ayyappa Paniker, "Krishnagadha' is the first major work that conveys the robustness of a fully-evolved Malayalam" (Paniker, 173).

'Krishnagadha' is the greatest work of Krishna Bhakti in Malayalam. Of all poets Kalidasa seems to have influenced Cherusseri the most. His familiarity with all the works of Kalidasa is traceable in 'Krishnagadha' (Bhaskaran, 203). In the following extract from the poem, Cherusseri describes an everyday scene with much effect. The twilight scenery is evoked with deft use of rhythm and emotion and metaphor. The disappearing sun in the horizon is compared to a red wedding necklace on the bosom of a lover. He also mentions paramours amorously seeking the houses of their illicit love. Lovers' bosoms swell with the joy of love. Garlands were exchanged between lovers as tokens. The koka birds in the trees were also pining for love. Cherusseri imbues the scenery with erotic intensity as well as a pastoral simplicity and innocence. He also inserts some sort of sociological realism into the scene when he says that the Brahmins worshipped the fading sun while the wayfarers carried on with their frenzied ways. The pastoral realism of the Bhakti poet is very much evident in the depiction of the cows and the cowherds at the twilight hour. Birds called each other across the tress, especially the koka birds and thus Cherusseri transposes the scene in the garden of Nanda to the tropical rainforests of northern Kerala.

### **Ludic interlude:**

When in the garden of Nandanam Nanda's son once stayed  
During one of those days while the sun was swiftly disappearing  
In the horizon appeared a bright light  
In the western sky like a wedding necklace on a beloved's bosom  
While all the Brahmins worshipped the twilight thus

Wayfarers were frenzied trying to reach their destinations  
Bovines with their cowherds were reaching their shelters  
Lovers swelling with amour were filled with joy  
Paramours sought the illicit vicinity of houses of their love  
Messengers male and female started their messageful journeys  
Necklaces were sent one after the other thus  
Birds calling each other sheltered in the branches of trees  
The koka birds sat looking at the moon in the horizon  
Like a lover would look at her beloved's face  
And lovingly tease out a lotus thread for the beloved (Namboodiri, Cherusseri, 99).

These passages are heavily inspired by the Bhagavata and the Gitagovinda.

Cherusseri famously calls Krishna the rainbow hued one or the 'Karvarnan,' again switching to a set of tropical metaphors.

The raincloud hued one was the most merciful on earth  
While in his infancy he lived in the vicinity of Desika  
Learning together they turned friends for long  
All the day-to-day deeds they performed clearly and masterly (Namboodiri, Cherusseri, 267)

This passage is a wonderful portion from the Krishnagadha depicting the friendship of Krishna and Sudama.

The story of Vrkasura is mentioned towards the end.

There was a brave world-conqueror  
By name Vrkasura and by paternity he was Sakuneya  
He was wondering who was the best deity who conferred boons  
When he saw Narada from afar he went upto him and asked  
"Which deity is the best to confer boons upon me?"  
He was told to propitiate Lord Siva  
And he immediately started worshipping him  
With intensity he propitiated the lord



But still when the Siva did not appear  
He got ready to sever his own head  
Immediately the snake-garlanded Siva appeared  
Ordered him to ask for what he wished  
“If I touch anyone’ s head, that person should die”  
The lord hesitated for a moment  
“Let it be so,” uttered the deity  
He heard this boon and thought about it,  
And rushed to touch the head of Siva  
Who started to flee upon his approach (Namboodiri, Cherusseri, 297).

In the episode titled ‘Rasa Kreedā,’ Cherusseri immediately shifts into the erotic. There is also a sonata like description of summer.

Just like the hearts of beauties, creepers abounded  
Like a tree, the blue rainbow-hued one was swaying nearby  
Warmth of summer had turned everything into yellow  
With the heat people approached temple gardens and ponds, their banks  
Women played watersports with their lovers  
Underneath fans gradually grew languorous  
Window panes were stimulated by air currents  
Sandalwood juices were applied on tender young girls  
Liquor dens opened wide for tired ones  
Invigorated nenmeni flowers’ fragrance spread everywhere  
Tender winds started coursing through mansions, telling,  
“Embrace tightly lover, for I would take the heat away”  
To each and every beautiful maiden thus (Namboodiri, Cherusseri, 80).

In this episode, the poet uses the image of changing seasons, that takes place in Vrindavan as if the space being described belonged in Kerala’s tropical heat. In the Mahakavya style it is necessary to describe the seasons Sharad, Shishir, Greshma, Vasant and Hemanta. The rich depiction of the wind currents and the languorous lazy folks is a description of the tropical regions. Cherusseri also invokes the images of ponds drying, and people taking shelter in temple groves, or ‘kavus.’

### **The Spatial poetics of Bhakti:**

Kavus belong to the local folk tradition of Kerala. A binary could be posited by pitting the local 'Kavu' traditions against the more classical and mainstream temple traditions. In this sense, the local 'kavu' traditions are conducive to the emotion of Bhakti. The consecrated deities are usually Naga or Bhagavathy or Sastha(Ayyappan). It was a common practice among the people to assign a portion of the land on which they built house to serpent god Naga or goddess Durga. Felling of trees or even removing a twig from these lands were considered taboo. The groves were looked after and maintained by joint families.

Eliza Kent says in the context of sacred groves of Tamil Nadu that, "to some extent the setting aside of sacred groves resembles the crucial distinguishing characteristic of the sacred according to, Emile Durkheim – that the sacred does not touch that which is profane, that is that which is connected to commerce, productivity and the ordinary exigencies of life. On the contrary, the villagers who maintain these groves say that the produce is used, the fruit that falls is auctioned off, dry branches can be collected and green branches are lopped off for goat fodder, government agencies even route roads and electrical lines through them and people will still say 'everything in it belongs to god.'" (Kent, 22) A torsion occurs, a gap emerges between the sacred and that which eludes it (the mundane/secular). This parallax gap is constitutive of the practices of kavu worship and makes co-existence possible.

Establishment of sacred groves was also seen as traditional efforts by the villages to conserve biodiversity and water resources. These groves had perennial water supply and thus supported human habitation. They also served as places for worshipping nature. (Suchitra, Web) The 'kavu' sheltered local deities. They were often associated with snake or 'naga' worship. In many instances, they were under feudal patronage. But they were also local spiritual retreats. They were not part of the vedic scriptural structure of medieval Kerala and offered some sort of departure from the mainstream Sanskritic discourse and thus offered non-political resistance. The 'kavu' spiritual retreats also involved performances and oral invocation of local deities who were out of the ambit of the classical scriptural corpus. Here bhakti found its wellspring. The kavu-kovil (grove-temple) complex was not mutually exclusive as the feudal structure of medieval Kerala society remained intact and was reflected in both cases and one was not a radical reaction against the other.

The 'kavu' or the grove and the 'kovil' or the temple are two traditions that are significant in the study of medieval Kerala. They are not always at odds. A temple might have an adjacent kavu or a kavu itself could contain consecrated spaces like shrines. It is a shift in perspective, from the inside to the outside, from 'akam' to 'puram'. In its spiritual core, the 'kavu' tradition never ran counter to the 'kshetra' tradition.

The temporal poetics of Bhakti ties it to the medieval milieu. The originary space of Bhakti is also dense and tropical and monsoon-fed. The rains that lash the poems, and the lush greenery on the banks of seasonal streams belong in the tropical landscape of Kerala, and particularly to the 'kavus' which were strips of primordial wilderness in the midst of so-called civilization. They were arboreal and were supposedly the seats of arboreal deities.

The 'kavu' rituals, provided the inspiration for Bhakti movement in general. Even the 'Rama bhakti' and 'Krishna bhakti' movements which were classically inflected took their sustenance. Even today the most popular deity in Kerala (and Tamil Nadu) remains the arboreal deity Sri Ayyappan. <sup>15</sup>In the heteroglossaic atmosphere of medieval Kerala, which was almost arboreal, the effusion of multiple sprouts of bhakti were tolerated. They were under feudal patronage, but they no doubt were also the store houses for seeds of spiritual upheaval literally, ecologically and futuristically rendering Kerala a touristy haven. <sup>16</sup>

The design of 'Kavu' spaces was tribal and there were attempts to recuperate the primordial fertility of the tropical forest. The 'kavu' was also a feminine space since the deities were mostly goddesses like Bhagavathy, Vanadurga, Nagayakshi, linked to the earth and vegetation and fertility. But on the other hand phallic forms were present in the form of prevalent snake worship and appeasement rituals of snakes, supposedly to prevent snake bite deaths.

The feminine energy and nature of the 'Kavu' space must be juxtaposed with the womb-like structure of the feudal 'Naalukettu' (house around a courtyard). The 'Kavu' was a domestic space, and was semi-private. They contained connotations of divine violence associated with self-mutilation by oracles as well as phallic presences like poisonous snakes including cobras.

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<sup>15</sup> Legend has it that the childhood friend of Ayyappan was Vavar, a Muslim.

<sup>16</sup>The iringole Kavu bhavathy Kavu, for example has a spread of over 2 lakh hectares. Source: [http://www.cpreecervis.nic.in/Database/Kerala\\_886.aspx](http://www.cpreecervis.nic.in/Database/Kerala_886.aspx) accessed on 6/9/2016 at 6.45pm IST.

Most of the pratishthas (consecrated deities) are nagas or nagathans<sup>17</sup> (snakes).The Kavus formed an interregnum between the human and the animal public and the private, and between the classical traditions of Sanskrit and Tamil, and age-old tribal customs.

### **Kaliyamardanam:**

One of the significant passages in the ‘Krishnagadha’ is the ‘Kaliyamardanam’ where Krishna dances on the hood of a many-headed venomous serpent name Kaliya and annihilates him. Kaliyan had terrorised the inhabitants who lived on either side of river Kalindi (Yamuna).

Some time was thus spend in the company of other children  
The boys were languorously herding their bovines  
Those two precious feet that were jewels of the earth  
By which stones and stalks of the forest swelled with pride  
In response to the boys’ request proceeded to the forest  
And slew the demon in donkey form that dwelled there  
The palm fruits were made available to the children and others  
Then with the young cowherds proceeded home  
Lending joy to the eyes and hearts of maidens  
One of those days all the cowherds in the forest  
They were thirsty from the heat and reached the Kalindi  
The waters were mixed with the poison of a venomous snake named Kaliya  
They drank in thirst and reached the bank of the river  
Soon the poisoned cattle started falling down  
The rainbow-hued one herding cattle, enjoying the scenery  
Slowly approached and found the cowherds  
Who had fallen on earth lifeless like sinners  
Krishna in sorrow hesitated for a split-second before this sight  
With his left eye looked at his compatriots  
Sprinkled piyusha upon the fallen  
The boys and cattle were thus risen sans languor. (Namboodiri, Cherusseri, 75).

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<sup>17</sup>The acclaimed poet MR.Vishnu Prasad has worked on pot human object oriented ontology and Kavuvorship and Thirayattom

The image of the black snake Kaliyan (most likely to have been a many headed cobra) and the folkish snake-worshipping traditions of rural Kerala are unmistakable. The river infested by Kaliyan, the Yamuna, could have been any one of the many rivers of Kerala.

The passage called 'Kaliyamardanam' idolises the infant Krishna (Bal Krishna) and not as a whole, but in parts, starting with the infant's feet in typical Freudian fashion. The drives derived from the episode are hence considered partial. The ideal 'kavu' ceremony was also a fractional of partial mimesis of the original full-blown temple ritual.

The episode of 'Kaliyamardanam' starts not with the depiction of Kaliyan in the river Yamuna, but that of the infant Krishna frolicking with his compatriots in the forest. There is also a premonition of the serpent slaying in the future in the form of the annihilation of a demon (asura) who had assumed the form of a donkey in the forest.

The slaying of the demon by the infant Krishna imbues the deity with the energy of demon slaying goddesses like Kali and Durga. Like the virile movemental energy of deities like Shiva, the infant Krishna annihilates evil with his playfulness, lila. An Indologist like Robert Goodwin chooses to "deal only with the monistic version of the play idea, leaving alone, dualistic literature of Vaisnava bhakti, where God's sport with the world is typified as Krsna's play with the Gopis(personifying the jivas, or human souls). I do this because I am approaching kavya through mainstream Indian aesthetic theory, and it is the monistic tradition of both Saivism and Vedanta that is pertinent to this. The dualistic model- with its adulation of Krsna as child, master, companion and lover-would also afford insight into kavyic patterns, since we see almost every nayaka (protagonist, hero) adulated in the same ways in the poems and plays" (Goodwin, 51).

This is keeping in with the mellow nature of much of Bhakti poetry. 'Kaliyamardanam' is a ludic episode which showcases the playfulness of the infant Krishna. This is focussed upon later also in episodes such as the 'Rasa Kreedā' which occurs in the garden of Vrindavan. 'It can hardly be accidental that lilas of the type we are discussing concern themselves primarily with three textual themes: Mahabharata, Ramayana, and the youth of Krsna (textually, that is, Harivamsa, then Bhagavata Purana). The first thing this should tell us is rather obvious: that lila traditions are rooted in bhakti, as are these texts: no less in their Sanskrit versions than in their vernacularizations, which our lilas enrich and build upon most directly' (Hiltebeitel, 206).

The young cowherds who are compatriots of Krishna first fall victim to the deadly venom of the serpent Kaliya. Their cattle also fall prey to the same. Only then does Krishna heroically arrive at the scene, much like a later day filmic hero, though the agenda set him by the Bhakti poet is not heroic, but playful and languorous, taking in the beauty of the arboreal scenery.

Darsan is one of the most fundamental categories in Hindu religious experience, and certain moments in the Krsnacarita particularly simulate it in Sur: the youthful , Krishna playing his flute, young Radha, the amours of the two of them, Krishna returning dust-laden from a day of herding cattle. Nothing calls it up more vividly, however than the thought of Krishna eating butter, and an analysis of Sur's butter thief poem shows why. In poems transmitting the vision of the butter thief - "verbal icons" as Bryant calls them- Sur plays out and resolves the most fundamental of visual tensions, that between black and white, in an experience that brings the whole world to harmony in this tiny child: "heaven and earth in little space," as the old English carol has it. These darsan poems typically emphasize that overcoming of boundaries by alluding in some way to the surrender of the beholder to what is seen. (Hawley, Krishna The Butter Thief, 105).

Cherusseri Namboodiri says that confronted with the sight of the lifeless cowherds and the cattle, Krishna revived them by sprinkling them with the elixir of life-piyusha. Thus Krishna in his infant form assumes the roles of the annihilator and also that of the life-giver. The 'kavu' tradition of Kerala also contains within it the remnants of ancient fertility cults, including the worshipping of mother goddesses, and the consecration of an effulgent tropical, arboreal landscape. Erotic-thanotic aspects of life are juxtaposed like the sides of a Lacanian mobius strip, alternately illuminating and darkening. It is this chiaroscuro effect imparts an erotic feel and ambience to the 'Krishnagadha.' The chiaroscuro effect is also produced by the alternating pangs of merger and separation in sambhoga srngara and vipralambha srngara according to the Rasa theory. Cherusseri goes on to describe Krishna's vanquishing of Kaliyan:

The rainbow-hued one thought thus: "Kaliyan,  
If i don't banish from Kalindi, same will repeat tomorrow."  
Meditating thus dwelled briefly on the blue banks  
Raced on thus stepping with sacred feet  
Scaling as if it were a small hill

Kaliyan frolicking with his mates and progeny  
 Was suddenly surprised and thought what was happening  
 The fierce snake assumed immense rage  
 “Who has arrived bravely at my lair, whether to die?”  
 Saying so rose showing his immense hood  
 With his breath the water started boiling  
 As he rose above the water, caught sight of Krishna in the distance  
 With pomp started swimming in the black waters  
 Sans doubts approached like rahu in sight of the moon  
 The tender feet touched by goddess Lakshmi  
 Were bitten, or so it seemed to sinners  
 Seeing no injury done, grew angry  
 Started biting the infant at vital spots  
 After doing such things hit him with the hood  
 Twisted himself around the infant’s body  
 While Krishna was thus engaging Kaliyan,  
 His parents were worried not seeing him back  
 “Why has not my son come back, he did by now yesterday.  
 Did he step on thorns while searching for lost cattle  
 Or did he fall down from some tree while plucking fruit  
 Or was he gored by cattle while herding them  
 Or did he lose his way in the forest and was tired  
 Was he cheated by a big leopard while travelling  
 Was he hurt while wrestling with his friends  
 The food has grown cold and the mind is hurting”  
 Mothers who give birth to children can be hurt thus (Namboodiri, Cherusseri, 75).

Here in this passage the infantile status of Krishna is brought to fore and the anxieties of Yashoda over her son are foregrounded even as we know that Krishna being a deity is immune from such petty harm. Yasoda fears whether her son has stepped on some poisonous thorn while searching for strayed cattle, or been gored by animals, or fallen down from some tree while trying to pluck fruit or been injured in games with his fellows or hurt by some wild animal. She

also worries that his food is growing cold and her heart is in pain. Such motherly concern is very much at home with the ecosystem of the 'kavu' amid mother-goddess worship.

The anxiety of the medieval Malayali reader is vicariously placed in the words of mother Yasoda and her anxiety is shared by the reader in his/her individual interpretation of the 'Krishnagadha.' There is a resolution of these anxieties in the lila of the child Krishna.

In this sense the ideal of the Bhakti poet is the arousing of spiritual emotion and the subduing of passion. Read allegorically, the image of the phallic snake with multiple heads is an augury of dark passions that will be annihilated by the seeding on Bhakti towards Krishna in one's heart.

Krishna himself is susceptible to the bites of the serpent, though he is immune to its venom owing to his divine status. In this sense the status of Krishna in this episode is semi-divine since he hesitates at the sight of rampant death and also is bitten by the snake, even though he annihilates the serpent and reanimates his compatriots and cattle.

Krishna in this episode has not reached full deity-hood that will emerge only later in Vrindavan in the episode of the 'Raskreeda.' The enormous responsibility placed on the shoulders of the Infant Krishna need not be belittled.

The imagery of the bhakti poetry here is phallic ludic play. Before the ludic play, the infant Krishna also revives his fallen comrades by sprinkling them with divine rasa, in what arguably is a metaphorical display of divine fertility, creativity and insusceptibility.

The dark passions that lie beneath the apparently calm surface of the dark waters are depicted as being danced upon by the infant Krishna who is the epitome of resurgent Bhakti spirituality in the Krishna bhakti tradition.

The idea of infantile divinity also sits well with the concept of mother goddess worship, given that the images of infant Krishna being bitten by a snake are juxtaposed by the pangs of mother Yasoda who bewails her missing child. The wailing mother, the arboreal pasture and the phallic villain fit well within the medieval matrilineal tradition in Kerala. The slain figure in the 'Krishnagadha' is not a paternal figure, but rather the maternal uncle, Kamsa, who poses the premier threat to the very divine existence of the infant Krishna.



Several boundaries are ruptured in the course of each lila. The most basic is transgressed when butter is taken out of the pot. Immediate and commonplace as it is, the pot is a significant boundary, where questions of limit are discussed in Indian philosophy, the pot is familiarly chosen as the standard example. A second boundary is abrogated when Krishna eats the butter. He shows no respect for the boundary of the mouth, smearing his butter all over his face. Again the boundary is significant, separating the inner self from the outer world. To ignore it is to flout Indian sensibilities and create the danger of serious pollution. In a third act of transgression, breaking the pot, Krishna not only disregards boundaries, he positively destroys them. (Hawley, Krishna The Butter Thief, 271).

The ‘Kavu’ in Kerala, as mentioned earlier in this chapter, has been a site of womb-like matrilineal symbolism, in the past as well as in the present. ‘Poothanamoksham’ is another significant episode in the ‘Krishnagadha.’

Nandan flourished as leader of the god-like Gopas  
Without issue he was burning and burning and thus spent time  
Yasoda with divine glow got pregnant with his child  
Knowing this Nanda was overjoyed  
He discussed the matter with astrologers and one of them said  
This womb shall give birth to a glorious divine child (Namboodiri, Cherusseri, 42).

This augury sort of prefigures the birth of Lord Krishna. Many attempts were made by the evil Kamsa on the life of the infant Krishna. One of them involved sending a demoness called Poothana in the guise of a beautiful woman to breastfeed Krishna. She applied poison on her mammarys and feeds the infant with that. The infant Krishna sucked the life out of Poothana and thus Poothana attained moksha.

A fiend by name Poothana walked the earth  
She in the guise of a beautiful woman reached the home of Nandagopa  
She applied a horrible poison on her mammarys  
She went and peeped inside the kids’ space  
She gazed at a sculpture like platform  
And the sleeping infant who was placed upon that

After gazing from a distance, she soon tactfully approached  
 Like a snake would tremulously approach Garuda the eagle  
 She stood gazing meditatively at the infant's sweet face  
 Slowly she went and touched the flower-like body  
 As a gem would touch fire  
 Without hesitation, she took the baby in her hands  
 As if taking a snake into one's hands  
 As she took the infant she had horripilation  
 With her long hands she carried the infant  
 Like an elephant would pluck sweet herbs from forest fire  
 She with her beautiful face kissed the child  
 Anyone would have desired to do that to that graceful face  
 The novel child, Poothana gazed at longingly  
 As a majestic lion would look at his body  
 Poothana hastened to her deed before interruption  
 Poothana thus into Nanda's child's mouth  
 Gave her evil breast, pleased were the sinful  
 With his hands the divine child grasped that  
 He imbibed from the breast as he would from his mom's good breast  
 Eagerly he drank as if from a cow's udder  
 As Poothana gave him her breast, he imbibed copiously  
 With intense pain she cried out aloud  
 Then she fell on earth, having parted from her spirit  
 The huge demon fell heavily on earth (Namboodiri, Cherusseri46).

Here Cherusseri Namboodiri foregrounds the role of the breast as partial object. The breast appears as a source of sustenance as well as death. That which gives life also takes away life. Poothana is a demoness and not Krishna's biological mother. Yet Poothana is a graceful woman unlike other demonesses in literature. Even as Poothana wants to kill the child, she is in rapture at the sight of the Infant Krishna. She want to suckle the child as well as kill him. But she is enamoured of the grace of the sleeping form of the infant. In this sense, she becomes a wet nurse or even a foster mother figure to the infant.

The murderous mother figure is foregrounded by using the image of the poisoned breast. The act of breastfeeding being considered an almost sacred thing, its perversion into some form of instrument of assassination is presented in a dark and grotesque way.

But the infant Krishna's playfulness still remains intact. The child's defence mechanism against the murderous strategy consists in imbibing an excess of poisonous nourishment. This is a double bind, psychologically. The mother-like figure is at the same time enamoured of the child and also wants to kill it.

The child on the other hand is blissfully imbibing the nourishment from the breast of the mother-figure, yet the child takes this action to an extreme where it leads to the death of the murderous nourisher. The nourishment, breast milk also has sacred connotations being a source of sustenance. But it is poisoned at source and has hence lost its nourishing quality and has become instead a device of death. Karna in the Mahabharata is in a similar double bind when his mother Kunthi reveals details of his exact provenance whereupon he should be overjoyed and return to the maternal bosom, but finds himself unable to do so when the mother instead asks him to relieve her favourite son, Arjuna.

The death of Poothana in this episode is called 'moksham.' Therefore she attains ultimate union with the godhead at the end of this murderous nourishment. She is not painted without shades of maternal mellowness and warmth. Her death is an act of jouissance whereby she experiences death as an ultimate 'bhava' or a passion-death. The use of the breast as murderous weapons can be found in South Indian Sangam literature also. In Ilango Adikal's 'Tale of the Anklet' (Chilappadikaram) also the heroine Kannaki severs her breasts and throws them to annihilate the holy city of Madurai. The power of the maternal figure as an agent of annihilation is encompassed within the caregiver-destroyer matrix. The Medea-like murderous intention and rage of the maternal figure and its shock-quotient are utilised by Cherusseri Namboodiri in this famous passage from the 'Krishnagadha.'

The discovery of Poothana's lifeless corpse and the reaction of the women and the succouring of the Infant Krishna are also described in some details by Cherusseri. Cherusseri says that the demon was huge in form and at her downfall, the earth shook and people were scared. The maids took the infant Krishna and applied medicaments and ointments on him.

The metaphor that Cherusseri uses of Krishna being taken from Poothana's bosom is that of a lion cub being removed from a dead elephant. So the valiant lion cub has apparently vanquished and killed the much larger elephant. The same feat has been performed by Krishna when he killed Poothana. The figure of the child is one that is close to Cherusseri's heart. He uses the image of breast-feeding child to impart a sense of innocence to a dark episode.

The maids' taking away of Krishna from Poothana's bosom is also compared to people hesitating before plucking a precious gem from a venomous serpent's hood. The serpent with the gem on its hood is a folk legend of Kerala, one that has become part of the lore that parents or grandparents tell infants to lull them to sleep. The same innocuous image is used here by Cherusseri. It also has darker connotations.

The venomous snake also represents phallic virility and it poses a threat to the young infant as was also evident in the episode of the 'Kaliyamardanam.' Poothana in death also becomes a phallic symbol. Psychoanalysts opine that erotically, the breast is an organ similar to the male sex organs since both produce secretions that are organically linked to the sustenance of life.

Thus Poothana in her life and passion-death is a feminine phallic figure and after her death she turns into a masculine one. Thus androgenous nature of the Poothana figure is significant in the context of the mystical nature of Cherusseri's Bhakti. The mythical figures appear in their hermaphrodite guise while introducing changes.

Thus the purpose of Krishna's incarnation on earth is underlined here. There are two kinds of mother figures in Indian mythology-the tooth mother and the breast mother. Poothana is but a breast mother gone bad. Cherusseri also compares Poothana to a lifeless, inanimate object when he says that she resembled the severed wing of a mountain that was mutilated by Devendra. Thus, from the sphere of the animate, Poothana passes on to the realm of the inanimate.

She has attained moksha and has become a part of the eternal godhead through her passion-death at the hands of the feeding infant incarnation of Vishnu, the god of sustenance. This has been deftly used by Cherusseri in the crafting of his Bhakti poem. Poothana is thus a figure deserving our sympathy and even veneration. She is the medea-like mother figure who gives life and takes away life. She also resembles mother nature in this sense, since nature too can give life and take away life in catastrophes, much like the demoness Poothana.

The earth shook and the ocean too swirled  
 The trees nearby fell down everywhere  
 The women reached their houses with their men  
 The flawless infant went inside in fear  
 And saw Poothana lying lifeless on the ground  
 Like a mountain severed from its side by Devendra  
 The playful infant on her bosom was also seen  
 Like a cub playing on top of a huge mount  
 Seeing this proceeded to take the infant Krishna  
 Like approaching a serpent desiring the gem on its hood  
 The playful child was petted and tickled and taken away  
 Like a lion cub taken from a dead elephant  
 Rituals of propitiation were done for fear of infection  
 The infant was tended to by beautiful women  
 Who bathed him in cow urine and applied on him cow dust  
 He was also made to crawl underneath a cow  
 A bovine ointment was applied followed by mud packs from the cow mount  
 (Namboodiri, Cherusseri46).

Though Ezhuthachan, Poonthanam and Cherusseri were devotees of Rama and Krishna, there seems to have existed a strong current of Saivite bhakti tradition also in Kerala.

The Vadakkumnathan Temple in the Thrissur district of Kerala, organises the majestic Thrissur Puram every year (in conjunction with the Paramekkavu Temple) and is a major centre of Saivite devotion in Kerala. The story goes that “as per the invitation of Parasurama, Siva along with Parvathy, Ganseha and Subrahmanya set out for Kerala from Kailasa. Towards the end of an arduous journey, the ox (vrishabha) on which he was travelling stalled atop a lonely hill. Siva ended his journey there and the present-day Vadakkumnatha Temple is located on that hill. The place got its name from Siva-Thrissivaperur. This legend shows the trajectory transmission of Saivite faith to the South.” (Ravindran 70) From the Vaishnavite to the Saivite was a mere shift in perspective and not an inherent contradiction to be settled.

“Though a Shiva temple it has to be surmised that the Thrikkandiyur temple was in effect a major nerve centre of the Bhakti Movement in Kerala, which was imbued with Vaishnavite ideals. Melpathur Bhattathiri was also a resident here for long. Just as in the rest of India, here also was born a novel literary culture inspired by the inner springs of Bhakti.” (Ravindran, 50-51) The Saivite-Vaishnavite synergy was not a distinction, but rather a parallax in the Žižekian sense.

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## CHAPTER 4: UNIQUE FEATURES OF MALAYALAM BHAKTI

Abraham is a Syrian Christian from Nagercoil and he looks the very image of Christ with his flat face and longish beard. Sometimes he talks poetry to Govindan Nair, especially of Eletchan (sic), and they compare notes on Malayalam words. When everything is over Govindan Nair will say: ‘Man, how can you know Malayalam? You have to be a Nair’. Abraham accepted this as an axiom. Only a Nair can know Malayalam. Only a Nair can belong to Malabar. Only a Nair can see right. Look at the boss, Bhothalinga Iyer. He can no more understand the truth than the buffalo can see a straight line. (Rao, 54).

The bhakti movement led by Ezhuthachan had far reaching impact on the socio-political spheres in Kerala. Not only did it lead to the development of the literary vernacular Malayalam, it also contributed to the emergence of the Nairs, a non twice- born caste, as arguably the most powerful social group in Kerala, leading people from all castes to question Brahmin supremacy.

Bhakti in Kerala did not belong to any of the major Indian schools or Sampradays. This often renders it indiscernible. The status enjoyed by Kerala Bhakti was not an outcaste one, but it maintained its cultural specificity. Kulasekhara Alvar, a ruler of the Chera dynasty in the 9<sup>th</sup> century CE, was born in Kerala <sup>1</sup> and in the discussions on Bhakti is often considered to be a Keralite, though he wrote the ‘Mukundamala’ and ‘Perumal Thirumozhi’ in Sanskrit and in his native Tamil respectively. A 1923 edition of the ‘Arthasastra’ was based on an old Malayalam manuscript<sup>2</sup> dated around 12<sup>th</sup> century CE, though it would be difficult to claim that Kautilya himself was a Keralite. But there certainly were creative exchanges during the medieval period between Sanskrit and the emerging vernacular Malayalam, which was yet to have a literature of its own. ‘Ascharyachoodamani’, a basic text for the ancient Sanskrit drama, Kutiyattom<sup>3</sup>, was composed by Sakthibhadran in Kerala. Healing traditions of Ayurveda also flourished in Kerala, centred on the Ashtavaidyans<sup>4</sup>. Bharati Jagannathan says that “the Alvars mentioned 97 shrines of Vishnu... including 13 in present-day Kerala and 2 in Andhra.” (Jagannathan, 227) According

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<sup>1</sup> The erstwhile royal family of Travancore claim their descent from him.

<sup>2</sup> The manuscript was found in Bavarian State Library. Patrick Olivelle suggests that the *Arthasastra* was composed in Maharashtra or Gujarat based on philological evidence. Therefore the old Malayalam manuscript must have been an early translation.

<sup>3</sup> Kutiyattam is the sole remnant of the Sanskrit drama tradition and has been classified by the UNESCO as a ‘Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity.’

<sup>4</sup> The Ashtavaidyans Namboodiri Brahmins of lower stature due to their examination of corpses etc. The Ashtavaidya tradition was inaugurated by Vagbhata who came from Sindh.

to Freidhelm Ernst Hardy, there was “a further smattering of Vaishnava shrines in Malainadu or modern Kerala.” (Hardy, 256)

Though Malayalam is a sister-language of Tamil and much younger in comparison, David Shulman says, citing Menon, based on linguistic evidence from the term ‘ulsavam’ (festival) that “Malayalam phonetic evaluation of Sanskrit is older than the Tamil evaluation.”(Shulman, 325)

Kerala also has had a long philosophical tradition from Sankara onward. This includes mathematicians like Nilakanta Somayaji, Madhavacharya, Sankara Warriar<sup>5</sup> and literary figures like Ezhuthachan, Poonthanam and Cherusseri and religious reformers and saints like Chattampi Swamikal and Sree Narayana Guru in the colonial era and Mata Amritananda Mayi<sup>6</sup> in the present day. Bhakti in medieval Kerala was preceded by a long and illustrious tradition of thought and literary creativity.

According to George Pati, “Kautilya’s Arthashastra tells of the Vedic Brahmin community, their organization and special customs, their skills of planning; the ‘Mathavilasaprahasana’ of Mahendravarma I and the ‘Avantisundari Kathasara’ of Dandin Kanchi also detail the community. EMS Namboodiripad (1952) argues that all people of Kerala, including Namboodiris and Nayars were originally from the same caste and that only after the arrival of the immigrant Brahmans did caste stratification become a part of the Kerala socio-religious and political fabric.” (Pati, 205-06)

Chera ruler Cheran Senkuttuvan who ruled Kerala in the second century CE, performed Vedic rituals of sacrifice and was a devotee of both Vishnu and Shiva. His brother and poet Ilango Adikal followed Jainism. Both of them had a mutual acquaintance called Kulai Vanikan Chattanar who followed Buddhism. Sengottuvan also dedicated the Kodungalloor Devi Temple to Kannaki, another popular cult of the Goddess (see Obeyesekere), who is related to the chastity concept of Karpu. “Senkuttuvan’s father Ceralathan was the contemporary of the last representative of the ‘Age of Anthology’. Kerala history writers mistook Velkezhu Kuttuvan or Kadal Piraku Ottiya Kuttuvan, a hero of the 5<sup>th</sup> decade of ‘Paditupattu’ for the Chera

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<sup>5</sup> Somayaji (1444,1545) wrote the famous *Tantrasamgraha*. He is said to have been a guru of Ezhuthachan himself. His work on planetary motion preceded Kepler by a century; Madhava, born in coastal Karnataka, later migrated to Kerala; Sankara Warriar, last of the great line of mathematicians from Kerala, lived in the 16<sup>th</sup> century CE, and wrote the ‘Kriyakramakari’.

<sup>6</sup> Born Sudhamani in Parayakadavu, a fishing hamlet near Kollam, the Mata did not have a spiritual guru.

Senkuttuvan of ‘Chilappathikaram’. KAN Sastri mixed up as one, two historical heroes who lived more than 350 years apart. He kept Cheran Senkuttuvan, as the central axis for fixing the Sangam age. The doyen of the theory of Aryanisation of South India, fixed 150 years from 100 AD as the age of Sangam and justified his theory of Aryanisation which held that before Christ there was total tribalism in the South” (Chellam, 73).

PP Narayanan Nambudiri uses RC Majumdar’s argument to postulate that the predominance of Aryan elements over pre-Aryan and tribal elements, in the progress of civilization in India was reversed in the case of Bhakti. According to him, the age of Sankara (8<sup>th</sup> c. CE) “was also an age when Kerala began to be separated gradually from the comity of the Tamil nationalities and to evolve a culture of its own. Unlike Tamil Nad, all streams of thought were accepted. Even the Dravidian practices were respected and synthesised. Out of a free synthesis and assimilation emerged the Hindu religion of Kerala” (Nambudiri, 157).

Kerala thus was never a backwater, but a vibrant centre of thought and activity. It imbued influences from outside. Kerala basked in the reflected glory of Sanskrit learning and scholarship and was not the origin of major movements including Bhakti. Even Sankara who was born in Kerala, and technically a Keralite, moved away from Kerala, to find a pan-Indian audience for himself. Thought and literary creativity in Kerala reached full effulgence with the rise of the vernacular Malayalam language, with Bhakti devotion espoused by Ezhuthachan, as its locus.

Malayalam scholar PK.Balakrishnan<sup>7</sup> dwells on Ezhuthachan’s poetic craft and its implications for the society of his time. The vernacular Malayalam arose from the non-elite and hence is compared to a lotus, which remains untouched by the mire of its origin. Balakrishnan puritanically calls the ‘Adhyatma Ramayanam’ a compendium of the ‘grotesque’. There are some instances in the ‘Adhyatma Ramayanam’ such as the one where Rama’s younger brother Lakshmana disfigures Ravana’s sister Soorpanakha.<sup>8</sup>

Ezhuthachan’s poetic gift is organically related to a debility and that lotus will not bloom but from the mire of that debility, and so much must be evident to those who seek for the roots of Ezhuthachan’s poetic craft. Such an investigation has to take note of the anatomy

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<sup>7</sup> Balakrishnan wrote on the caste system in Kerala in his ‘Jathiyavasthayum Kerala Charitram’ (Caste system and history of Kerala). Later in his life he also served as Editor of the right-wing Muslim daily ‘Madhyamam’.

<sup>8</sup> In Ezhuthachan’s account it is the breasts rather than the nose that is removed.

of his ‘Adhyatmaramayanam.’ The truth that follows from such an endeavour is that just as the ‘Bharatham Kilippattu’ is not a precise translation of Vyasa’s Mahabharatha, the ‘Ramayanam Kilippattu’ is not a translation of the Sanskrit Ramayana. Translation is the task of transcribing a celebrated and extraordinary text in a different language into another language while retaining its extraordinariness. The special nature of the source text, and the robustness of a target language to receive that extraordinarily special text are pre-requisites for the translator. (Balakrishnan, Ezhuthachan’s Craft, 84).

Balakrishnan also says that the absence of evidence makes it impossible for us to surmise or the spoken Malayalam used during Ezhuthachan’s time. There must have been tensions invisible to present-day readers, between writers preferring Sanskrit and Malayalam. Mythical anecdotes abound that have over the centuries acquired the status of legends regarding competition between Malayalam and Sanskrit languages. There were tensions between the oral and written formats. In modern times also, the tension is evident, since the first printed volume of Ezhuthachan came out 38 years after the start of book printing in Kerala. It was ‘Mahabharatham Kilippattu’ which was printed by a Tamilian called Kalahasthiappa Muthaliar in 1862. ‘Ramayanam’ was published in 1863. PK Rajasekharan says that it “took a Tamilian to free the father of Malayalam from the palm-leaf manuscript.” (Rajasekharan, 42) The first 68 parts of the book were printed in ‘Kerala Vilasom Press’ in Trivandrum, and the rest in ‘Vidya Vilasom Press’ in Manjeri.<sup>9</sup> Both the books were runaway bestsellers, resulting in multiple subsequent imprints.

Rajasekharan says that the works of Ezhuthachan formed a thread that connected Kerala, across its 44 rivers and multiple lakes. Kerala was a land “wounded by island-forming rivers and streams which was healed by the kilippattu of Ezhuthachan. Ezhuthachan created bridges and threads made of words” (Rajasekharan, 42). Ezhuthachan’s oeuvre was widely circulated orally and through palm leaf manuscripts so that the new technology of printing seemed redundant, or the structure of oral and manuscript dissemination proved too powerful to break. That is perhaps the reason why it took almost 4 decades since the arrival of printing technology in Kerala, for Ezhuthachan’s works to be published in the print form.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> The section printed in Manjeri came to be called the ‘Manjeri Bharatham’.

<sup>10</sup> Rajasekharan movingly describes his discovery of the first edition of Ezhuthachan’s ‘Mahabharatham Kilippattu’ at the National Library in Kolkata, reciting the verse ‘Manushyapadmeshu Raviswaroopam, Pranaumi Thunchathezhum Aryapadam’, as he received the sole remaining copy of the century-and-half-old book casually wrapped in brown paper and tied with jute thread.

Echoes of the later ‘Sudravimochanam’<sup>11</sup> or liberation of the oppressed can be read in the rise of the new vernacular, Malayalam against the classical Sanskrit. This is a passive rebellion of the non-Brahmin against the Brahmins. Ezhuthachan, himself a non-Brahmin was careful enough not to provoke anger and jealousy. The relative absence of verbal gimmicks and obscure lore in his verse points towards this. According to Raghava Warriar and Rajan Gurukkal, “There have been obvious attempts to link the heroes to Brahmins by birth. In the story of Thunchathu Ezhuthachan, the Brahmin is the genitor himself. Then there are those gifted a birth by the blessings of a Brahmin.” (Warriar and Gurukkal, 120) The balance of power between the castes segues into the tension between Sanskrit and the vernacular Malayalam. Such a simple equation between caste status and linguistic preference doesn’t hold for Poonthanam, who was a Namboodiri Brahmin who wrote in simple Malayalam verses. The evolving field of linguistic creativity in medieval Kerala must have been immensely complicated by socio-political as well as theological factors.

Some narratives delve deeper into the text. The legend on Poonthanam’s ‘bhakti’ and Melpathoor’s ‘vibhakti’ is celebrated. These stories buttress that in the matter of enjoyable delectation, Malayalis prefer Poonthanam. Another notable point is that the Guruvayoor temple forms that backdrop to these legends. There is an anecdote of Melpathoor Bhattathiri circumambulating the Guruvayoor temple while chanting a sloka from his ‘Narayaneeyam’ and a young Namboodiri corrected him on a finer point and directed him to consult Poonthanam for further information. Some distant echoes can be listened to here, of competition in poetic vocabulary between Sanskrit and Malayalam and of love tinged pride in the vernacular Malayalam. (Warriar and Gurukkal, 24).

## **PARAMATMA AND MAYA-Diversity of the Ramayana Tradition**

There have been many instances of the Ramayana and Rama himself being used for narrow political gains.<sup>12</sup> This has to be recognized as such. There has risen a situation where the essence of Ramayana is being rejected for narrow political ends.

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<sup>11</sup>The caste hierarchy of ‘Varnashrama dharma’ operated differently in Southern India, as described by Nicholas Dirks in *Castes of Mind*.

<sup>12</sup>The demolition of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya in 1992 and the surrounding controversies piqued my own curiosity vis-a-vis Sri Rama.

In the 'Adhyatma Ramayana' of Ezhuthachan, an answer is given to the question regarding the best place for Sreerama to reside. The answer is that the devotee's mind is the best place for Sreerama to reside. In Kerala as well the Rama cult is strong with many people following Ezhuthachan taking Rama for Ishtadevata or favourite deity. There are over 22 major temples devoted to Sri Rama in Kerala. These are: Alathiyur Sreeraman temple, Chiralayam Sreeraman temple, Chirangara Sreeraman temple, Chittoor Thekke Gramam Sreeraman temple, Chokoor Sreeraman temple, Jeralathu Sreeraman temple, Kadavallur Sreeraman temple, Karimpuzha Sreeraman temple, Kothallur Kunnu temple, Mattam Kadavallur Sreeraman temple, Ponkuzhi Sreeraman temple, Ramapuram Sreeraman temple, Ramapuram Sreeraman temple, Sajivothamapuram Sreeraman temple, Thirumani Venkitapuram Sreeraman temple, Thirumarayoor Sreeraman temple, Thiruvangadu Sreeraman temple, Thrikkalathur Sreeraman temple, Thriprayar Sreeraman temple, Tripunithura Sreeraman temple, Velinellur Sreeraman temple, Vellarakadu Sreeraman temple. Out of these the Chittoor Thekke Gramam Sri Raman temple is associated with Ezhuthachan. There a Guru Madom still exists where Ezhuthachan's mortal remains are supposed to be kept.

The major works of the father of Malayalam language Thunchathu Ezhuthachan are 'Adhyatma Ramayanam,' 'Mahabharatham' and 'Bhagavatham.' Out of these, 'Mahabharatham' and 'Ramayana' are stories of incarnations— Krishna and Rama. Among the works translated from the Sanskrit by Ezhuthachan, the author of 'Adhyatma Ramayana' is unknown. The author of 'Mahabharata' is Vyasa. Ezhuthachan has translated these works loosely based on their originals in a free manner. In this translation more importance has been given to some passages and some significant passages have been omitted. Some parts were added on by Ezhuthachan. Before analysing 'Adhyatmaramayanam,' some other Ramayana's have to be familiarised with.

In India and other Asian countries there are many different Ramayanas. 'Kambaramayanam' written by Kambar in Tamil in 12th century<sup>13</sup>, 'Ramavataracharitram' composed by Karprakash Bhattar, 'Ramakam' also called 'Diva' in Kashmir, 'Adiramayanam' in Telugu, 'Nirvatanottara Ramayana' composed by Theekkannu, Sarla Das' Ramayana in Odia, Krittibas' Ramayana in Bangla, 'Bhavartha Ramayana' in Gujarat, all these are Ramayana stories in India. Sri Lanka,

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<sup>13</sup>The lilting rhythms of the recitation of 'Adhyatma Ramayanam' and 'Kamba Ramayanam' constitute a parallax. In colloquial speech in Kerala, especially Southern Travancore, a mechanical lilting or sing-song voice is often ridiculed as 'reciting Kamba Ramayanam'.

thought to be Ravana's land, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Myanmar, Laos, Philippines, Java, Sumatra, Mali, Cambodia also have their Ramayana stories. 'Ramaki' is the Ramayana of Thailand. It is Yamastya in Myanmar, Ramacareplant in Cambodia, Sriakath in Laos, Serirama in Malaysia, Kakavin in Indonesia, and so on in other Asian countries.

Those who have analysed different Ramayanas have opined that Ezhuthachan's Ramayana and other Asian Ramayanas outside India have more differences than similarities in common. Thunchathu Ezhuthachan is universally admired and is an immortal. Ezhuthachan's name is nowhere mentioned in the 'Adhyatma Ramayana.' Later on poets and great men came to address him as Thunchathu Ramanujan Ezhuthachan. Right in the beginning of his Ramayana, Ezhuthachan mentions his elder brother.

Elder brother mine is a great scholar  
My teacher and we lonely folks  
In our innermost minds praise Ramanamacharya  
And other major teachers. (Ezhuthachan, 'Adhyatmaramayanam').

According to MK. Panikotti, from these lines it can be surmised that Ezhuthachan's elder brother was his teacher also. (Panikkotti, 29)

### **Ramayanas of Kerala:**

The oldest existing Ramayana of Kerala, interestingly is not Thunchathu Ezhuthachan's 'Adhyatma Ramayanam,' but the 'Ramacharitam' of Cheeraman. Many other versions of the Ramayana are also in existence in Kerala. Prominent among them are Thunchathu Ezhuthachan's 'Adhyatmaramayanam,' '24-vrttam,' and the 'Kerala Varma Ramayanam' allegedly composed by a man called Kerala Varma. The feudal leisurely class imbued a Sanskrit education and often produced scholars of high quality who adapted and adopted the Ramayana in their Malayalam works. Among these is the 'Ramachandravilasom' written by Azhakathu Padmanabha Kurup. In the puppet play tradition of 'pavakkoothu' Stuart Blackburn suggests that the Ramayana story received a cynical response from the audience. Blackburn says that scholars have faulted "Kerala tradition for its apparent unresponsiveness. But the absent audience may have contributed to the complexity of the puppeteer's art." (Blackburn, 170)

A performative text called ‘Ramanattam’ was written by the erstwhile ruler of Kottarakkara called Kottarakkara Thampuran. The Malayalam metre called ‘Manjari’ was employed in the crafting of ‘Ramayana Manjari’ by Oduvil Sankarankutty Menon. ‘Bhasha Ramayana Chamбу’ by Kadathanattu Krishna Warrier foregrounded its non-Sanskrit native character by adding the prefix ‘Bhasha’ where Bhasha stood for non-Sanskrit or Malayalam. Another performative text of the Ramayana, for Kathakali in this case, is the ‘Ramayanam Attakatha’ by Mannanthala Neelakantan Moos.

In the performative ‘Thullal’ tradition ‘Ramayanam Thullal Kathakal’ were composed by Naaluketil Krishna Menon. One of the triumvirates of modern Malayalam poetry also composed his own version of the Ramayana meant for children. This is the ‘Bala Ramayanam’ by Kumaran Asan. In addition to these ‘Kamba Ramayana’ by Kambar in Tamil was translated by SK. Nair. The Hindi version of the Ramayana composed by Tulsidas or the ‘Thulasi Ramayana’ was translated by Vennikkulam. These are some of the Ramayanams existing in Malayalam language. Kunjan Nambiar who was the pioneering poet in the ‘Thullal’ tradition in Kerala has written 8 ‘Thullal’ works. These were based on the Ramayana. Various local manifestations of the Ramayana including those in folk art forms such as puppetry are in existence.

Many dramatic texts in Malayalam have also used the Ramayana as their source. Some of these and their authors are:

| <b>TEXT</b>            | <b>AUTHOR</b>                       |
|------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Seethaswayamvaram      | Kodungalloor Kunjikkuttan Thampuran |
| Mandodari              | Sardar KM Panikkar                  |
| Adbhutha Ramayanam     | M.Neelakandan Moossu                |
| Seethaharanam          | N.Sankaran Nair                     |
| Bhasha Ramayanam       | A.Govinda Pillia Chattambi          |
| Ravana Puthran         | Pallathu Raman                      |
| Lankam Ravana Palitham | Madasseri Madhava Warrier           |

Some of the poems of the modern age that have borrowed from the Ramayana story, and their authors are:



| <b>TEXT</b>           | <b>AUTHOR</b>               |
|-----------------------|-----------------------------|
| Chintavishtayaya Sita | Kumaran Asan                |
| Sita Devi             | P.Kunjiraman Nair           |
| Innathe Sandhya       | Sugatha Kumari              |
| Samarppanam           | Punalur Balan               |
| Thamasa Kananangalil  | Pala Narayanan Nair         |
| Ravanaputri           | Vayalar Rama Varma          |
| Lakshmanan            | Vishnu Narayanan Namboodiri |
| Vibhishanan           | Balamani Amma               |
| Sabari                | Ayyappa Panikkar            |
| Ahalya                | k.Satchidanandan            |

It is clear from above tables that from the time of Ezhuthachan onwards, the Ramayana story has captivated the Malayali audience. It seems significant to note that Ezhuthachan deviated from the original Ramayana by Valmiki and instead adopted the ‘Adhyatma Ramayana’ to be translated into Malayalam. The ‘Adhyatma Ramayana’ in Sanskrit is a more Bhakti-centric version of the original Ramayana. The ‘Adhyatma Ramayana’ is the pivotal text in the Ramabhakti movement also. It must have been this focus on Bhakti that predisposed Ezhuthachan in favour of the ‘Adhyatma Ramayana’ rather than the original Ramayana text. The text of the ‘Adhyatma Ramayana’ takes the form of a conversation between Lord Shiva and Parvati<sup>14</sup> and it is supposed to have been authored by Ved Vyas himself though the authors might have been various and the Bhakti elements must have accrued later in the course of time. This ascription of the composition of the text of ‘Adhyatma Ramayana’ to Ved Vyas is most certainly a wrong one.<sup>15</sup> The text of ‘Adhyatma Ramayana’<sup>16</sup> with its spiritual orientation, metaphorically posits Rama as the Paramatma and Sita as Maya and it self-referentially extols the spiritual virtues of the Ramayana. It expounds the principles of Vedanta philosophy. Rama here represents the Brahman, or is the Brahman himself. There is a direct one-to-one correspondence between the sagun qualities of the Brahman and the nirgun prakriti, which is eternal and unchanging.

<sup>14</sup>This dialogue is then related to Brahma by the sage Narada.

<sup>15</sup> ‘Adhyatma Ramayana’ was most likely composed during the early years of the second millennium CE.

<sup>16</sup>The ‘Adhyatma Ramayana’ comprises the later segments of the ‘Brahmanda Purana’.

‘Adhyatma Ramayana’ is a later philosophical version of the Valmiki Ramayana. According to Lalita Kuppaswamy, “if ‘Valmiki Ramayana’ is the fountain source, then ‘Adhyatma Ramayana’ is the broad river emerging from it. If ‘Valmiki Ramayana’ is the seed, then ‘Adhyatma Ramayana’ is the developed tree.” (Kuppaswamy, 29)

The ‘Adhyatma Ramayana’ in Sanskrit reframes the original Ramayana in a slightly more ‘spiritual’ context with Bhakti inflections. It accepts Rama’s exile to the forest as amor fati and interprets the maid Manthara’s instigation of Bharatha’s mother Kaikeyi as divinely inspired by Goddess of knowledge Saraswati herself since the exile of Rama leads to the later annihilation of the demon Ravana which was the intention of the incarnation of Vishnu that Rama was supposed to be. This is subsequent to the sage Narada visiting Rama prior to his coronation and exhorting him to abdicate in favour of exile. Rama is posited not as the perfect human, but as Brahman himself and thus he is not capable of negative deeds like murder and on the contrary rather confers salvation on those whom he annihilates. This highlights the spiritual fervour of Bhakti. Demons, Rakshasas and others who have been waiting for millennia for the Rama avatara in Treta Yuga<sup>17</sup> so as to attain salvation are described as gaining Moksha at the divine sight of Rama. Thus the past and the narrative present coalesce in the ‘Adhyatma Ramayana’ in an atmosphere of predetermination and divine grace.

Bhakti espoused a philosophy of ‘Bhedabheda’ or non-differentiation. Between paramatma and jeevatma, there is a dichotomy analogous to that between the prakrti and purusa, between nature and culture, between object and subject. Shankaracharya, took four great sentences from the Upanishads namely ‘aham brahmasmi’, ‘tat tvam asi’, ‘ayam atma brahma’ and prajnanam brahma’. Bhedabheda does not coincide with the Advaita, rather it constitutes a parallax between difference and non-difference, (sometimes called ‘difference-in-identity’).

It is a dvanda compound, consisting of, bheda (difference) and abheda (non-difference). Bhedabheda philosophy would be the philosophy of ‘difference and non-difference’, holding out the promise of bridging the philosophers who subscribe to the theory of difference (or dualism, dvaita) and complete, unqualified non-difference (non-dualism, advaita). In the Western secondary literature on Indian philosophy where

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<sup>17</sup>The Treta Yuga or age comes after the Satya Yuga and is followed by the Dvapara and the Kali Yugas. These are the four time-periods of mankind. During Treta Yuga, the bull of Dharma stood on three feet.

Bhedabheda is mentioned, it is translated as 'Difference-in-identity' philosophy, linking it with the Western tradition of 'Difference-in-Identity' typified by thinkers like Bonaventure, Spinoza and Hegel. Although there are similarities between these Western thinkers and Indian Bhedabhedavadins, purely on the basis of Sanskrit grammar, 'difference-in-identity' cannot be the translation of Bhedabheda. A preferable translation is the more literal 'difference and non-difference' since linguistically it opens the question of whether difference is ultimately subsumed under non-difference or vice versa. (Nicholson, 39)

Interestingly, as per the Sanskrit 'Adhyatma Ramayana' the abduction of Sita by Ravan, the pivotal instigation for action in the Ramayana never took place. Instead, a Maya Sita created by the invocation of the fire god Agni under the instruction of Rama, was abducted by Ravan and the war was fought to recover this Maya Sita. Such magical elements must have prompted Ezhuthachan to select the 'Adhyatma Ramayana' for his translation. The 'Adhyatma Ramayana' in Sanskrit spiritualizes Rama more than the Sanskrit original. It has 7 sections or Kandas: Bal Kand, Ayodhya Kand, Aranya Kand, Kishkinda Kand, Sundar Kand, Lanka Kand and Uttar Kand. In the philosophical inflected 'Adhyatma Ramayana', Rama is 'sat, citta and ananda'.

The Indian 'I am Brahma,' and that so-called religion, the 'I' of the modern faith of reflection, differ from one another in their external relations only; the former expresses the primitive apprehension of the mind in its naïve form, in which the pure substantiality of its thought comes into existence for self-consciousness, so that it allows all other content whatever to exist beside it and recognises it as objective truth. (Hegel, 204)

Ezhuthachan says that the living soul that one can see is the jeevatma and it is nothing but the paramatma's reflection. The human form is divine since it is a reflection of the celestial divine form of the paramatma.<sup>18</sup> The image of the paramatma is reflected in the human being. Thus the spirit that animates the human being is the paramatma itself. Here Ezhuthachan encapsulates the ideology of Bhakti which essentially is one of equality of all creation, whether man, woman, child or animal. In this sense he says that like a lake would shadow the big, clear sky, the human soul in its confined state reflects the majesty of the paramatma. The humonguous size of the sky is not in proportion to the lake which is miniscule in comparison. Yet the lake can reflect the

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<sup>18</sup>The jeevatma is the individual self while the paramatma is the universal self.

entire blue sky. Thus the jeevatma or the human spirit can reflect the giant universal spirit of the paramatma.<sup>19</sup> And this is not a fraud perpetrated by man. It is the work of nature. The paramatma is the parabrahmam. This is the infinite spirit that encompasses the earth and skies and the planets and the entire universe. In this sense, the universe can be captured within the minute crevice of the human mind. But the mind has to be still, says Ezhuthachan. The lake in the previous metaphor also has to be still for it to reflect the humonguous sky. Thus stillness has to be learned. This learning can be done by acquiring the knowledge of ‘tatvam asi’ or ‘thou art that.’ This is the essence of the Upanishadic teaching. The knowledge of ‘tatva’ has to be acquired from a guru figure. Knowledge of ‘tatva’ can be gained only through the freely given grace of a teacher or guru figure. This will lead to the loss of selfish desires in the human mind. One also has to be pious. Even people<sup>20</sup> who are well-versed in the sciences or the ‘sastras’ fall into error, due to naivete and the lure of desire. Ezhuthachan says that those people who lack in Bhakti won’t gain philosophical knowledge or grace in even a hundred thousand lives.

The reflection of the deity of paramatma  
That you see is the jeevatma<sup>21</sup>, know this  
In the virtuous form that is mine, maya  
Without fraud is shadowed dear monk  
In each lake simply the big sky  
If you look straightly as you see  
The paramatma that is the parabrahmam  
The witnessing figure is still my dear!  
With the great meaning of tatvamasi, my  
Tatva can be known with guru’s grace  
The pious one when he learns this line  
Won’t reach selfish state without doubt  
Those averse to faith over science’s trenches  
Jump in through naiveté in desire

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<sup>19</sup>The Sreemad Bhagavatham says that anandam paramatmanam atmastham (Sreemad Bhagavatham: 11.26.1). This means that the paramatma seated in the soul of every being is the seat of every joy.

<sup>20</sup>The sookshma sarira or subtle body is the astral body of ethereal energies. The karana sarira or causal body is that which gives raise to it.

<sup>21</sup>The causal body (karana sarira) together with the subtle body (sookshma sarira) is called the jeevatma.

Those lacking in bhakti even in a hundred thousand births  
Won't obtain philosophical jnana and grace  
The secret of my heart that is paramatma  
Thus must not be related to those  
Humans who go about faithless!  
There is no core advice above this  
That Sree Mahadeva told Mahadevi<sup>22</sup>  
The greatness of Rama is sacred and most hidden  
The real Sree Rama's praises are for Vayu's son<sup>23</sup>  
Moksha-giving, sin-slaying and heartening  
Core teachings of all Vedas, Rama tatva  
Was preached to sagely Hanuman  
Man who studies this with bhakti  
Shall attain mukti verily my Lord!  
Murder of Brahmans and similar sins multiple  
Having been earned through births, still  
Everything shall be destroyed said Rama  
To the great monkey and that's truth. (Ezhuthachan, Adhyatmaramayanam, 29)

The existence of the 'Adhyatma Ramayana' in a spiritually infused context underlines the diversity of the Ramayana narrative tradition. Ezhuthachan appears to have been particularly insistent upon tracking the deviations in 'Adhyatma Ramayana' from the original Valmiki Ramayana. Divine presence imbues the narrative present beyond human actions and intentions.

Ezhuthachan has mostly stayed close to the original version of the 'Adhyatma Ramayana' into Malayalam. He adopted local Malayalam 'birdsong' (kilippattu) metres in favour of more traditional and classical Sanskrit metres, thus giving the name 'Adhyatma Ramayanam Kilippattu' to his translation. Ezhuthachan also intermittently incorporates various incantatory prayers in praise of Rama into his narrative, in the best known traditions of the Ramabhakti movement. He also developed portions of the original by elaborating the narrative.

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<sup>22</sup>This is a conversation between Shiva and Parvati.

<sup>23</sup>Hanuman is 'Vayu Putra'.

In a Malayalam compilation of hymns in the Ramayana, meant to be chanted on various ritual and non-ritual occasions, based on Ezhuthachan's version of the 'Adhyatma Ramayana', Gopalakrishna Vaidik includes 'Sri Rama dhyana sloka', 'Ishta devata vandanam', 'Kausalya stuti', 'Ahalya stuti', 'Sutheekshana stuti', 'Agasthya stuti', 'Jatayu stuti', 'Kabandha stuti', 'kriya margopadesam', 'swayam prabha stuti', 'nindastuti (condemnation) of Ravana', 'Narada stuti', 'Aditya stuti' and 'Aditya hridayam'. (See Vaidik)

Ezhuthachan incorporated many innovations in metrical prosody in his transmission of the 'Adhyatma Ramayana' from Sanskrit into Malayalam. Ezhuthachan chose the Sanskrit 'Adhyatma Ramayana' in order to mark the stamp of his individuality and uniqueness, since the Sanskrit original shows in almost every line of it the clear impress of its author's personality'. (Kuppuswamy, 25)

R.Narayana Paniker in his literary history of Malayalam, 'Kerala Bhashasahityacharitam' calls Ezhuthachan "less a point of origin than a moment of transformation. He argues that, contrary to the claims made by preceding scholars, Ezhuthachan did not invent any new metre; the metres he used can all be found in the non-Sanskritized pattu literature that preceded him". (Kumar, Udaya 41) Paniker places Ezhuthachan within a "emerging pan-Indian, nationalist historiography of literature, where the specific temporalities of various Indian languages could be located" (Kumar, Udaya 41). Paniker, in his 'Keralabhaashasahityacharitam'. Vol.2, pp. 398-99, compares Ezhuthachan's innovation to those of Hemachandra in Bengal (Kumar, Udaya 41).

Bhakti was an entirely different theology compared to the Vedas. Yet the sensibility of Bhakti made it possible for it to gain acceptance far and wide. The intimacy and immediateness that Bhakti bought the lay devotee was unparalleled. It arose around temples and saints but followed a progressively immanent movement.

Bhakti for all its egalitarian posturing was a temple-oriented movement as R.Champakalakshmi points out. "A study of the South Indian urbanization has shown the crucial importance of the bhakti ideology in initiating , through the temple, agrarian expansion and integration, and a subsequent economic diversification that led to the urbanization and emergence of cities" (Champakalakshmi, Trade, Ideology and Urbanization). Urbanization is even today an ongoing process. Kerala has often been compared to a continuous urban stretch. Temple-focussed bhakti

was solipsistic. The Kerala historian Rajan Gurukkal would say that ‘the historical context of bhakti was the consolidation of the contradictory agrarian relations of contemporary village society. Through the cult of complete surrender at the feet of the deity consecrated in the local temple as the final refuge, it provided an illusory solace to the harassed and the oppressed in the social system’ (Gurukkal, 293). From a Marxian point of view, Bhakti was a variety of the infamous opium, lulling the toiling masses into a fake sense of serenity and devotion, a classical instance of bad faith. The servitude of the bhakti to the deity was nothing other than the social reality of the time. The feudal orientation of Bhakti has been criticized by DD Kosambi and Vijay Nambisan among others.

With Ezhuthachan, Rama bhakti became the active principle of society. Ezhuthachan in his bhakti fervour says that all bhogas (lusts) are fleeting and the human lifespan is too short.<sup>24</sup> The metaphor he uses is that of water drops on burning metal. In a reader response fashion this can be interpreted as further proof of Ezhuthachan’s general bhakti orientation in his works. But at the same time this could also be read as a pointer to the existing social circumstances in medieval Kerala of his time. Ezhuthachan himself belonged to the vocational group of traditional oil pressers. This bhakti-infused verse could be also read as shedding light on the material aspects of smithy and blacksmith’s guild and medieval metalwork in Kerala. (see Srinivasan) Such smithies in medieval Kerala used indigenous technologies which were later upset by the arrival of modernity. Such a diverse way of reading Ezhuthachan’s work is in sync with the Ramayana tradition which is far from monolithic.

Ezhuthachan also uses metaphors of wayfarers in a wayside inn and that of floatsam in a flowing river for human life in this world. It has to be noted that wayside inns were crucial points of commercial, intellectual and linguistic exchange in medieval Kerala. Ezhuthachan’s works can similarly be sifted for mundane everyday data and incidental factoids which root them in a world different from that of mystical bhakti. Floatsam in a river could be an aside on the prevalent practice of felling trees from the tropical forests of Western Ghats and rafting the logs downriver to the cities.

Thus bhakti is not the be all and end all of Ezhuthachan’s cosmic vision (R.Champakalakshmi, in *Religion, Tradition and Ideology*, has for instance termed Bhakti as the ideology of medieval

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<sup>24</sup> ‘Bhogangalellam kshanaprachanjalām’ is perhaps the most widely quoted line in all of Ezhuthachan’s oeuvre.

South India). Even bhakti is tinged with material and non-spiritual mundane connotations. This is the wider perspective that the parallax opens up.

### **EZHUTHACHAN'S METAPHORS**

Ezhuthachan was extremely frugal in the use of his metaphors. Though he was more adventurous in the use of metre and rhyme, he used metaphors only sparingly. He for instance compares the stretching of the bow by Srirama during the 'Sitaswayamvara' (haradhanubhanga) and the subsequent breaking of the bow to a thunder strike. This has originally been taken from the 'Kannasaramayana' composed by the Kannassa poets. In Ezhuthachan's narrative, many instances can be found for similar lifting of tropes from other poets.<sup>25</sup>

One episode of the Ramayana that Ezhuthachan embellished particularly with similes, metaphors and irony is the burning of Lanka (Lankadahanam). His style can be terse and cryptic while retaining the epic scale of the original.

According to Marxist ideologue P.Govinda Pillai, "although Ezhuthachan had deviated very much from Valmiki's Ramayana to infuse into his poem his spiritual enthusiasm, he stuck close to Vyasa when writing the Mahabharata" (Pillai, G. 244). In his 'Mahabharatham Killippattu' Ezhuthachan achieves a more mature style. He is neither translator nor transcreator, but performs the act of transmission. "The change from Ezhuthachan's 'Adhyatmaramayana' to his 'Mahabharata' is like the one from flower to fruit" (Menon, C.A. 127).

In the Streeparva of the 'Mahabharatham Kilippattu,' there is the heartwrenching scene of old Gandhari bewailing her fallen kinsmen. Birds are preying on the dead Sakuni. The word Sakuni itself means 'bird.' Ezhuthachan uses a trope to juxtapose the birds pecking at the lifeless corpse of Gandhari's brother Sakuni with Sakuni's own name, his name literally means 'bird,' and thus establish an affinity between the two. But to put words to that effect into the mouth of Gandhari goes against the character of this epic character and appears inexplicable. Ezhuthachan, in a stark departure from the original also displays a marked dislike of Karna, one of the heroes of the

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<sup>25</sup> "One of the surest tests [of the superiority or inferiority of a poet] is the way in which a poet borrows. Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal; bad poets deface what they take, and good poets make it into something better, or at least something different. The good poet welds his theft into a whole of feeling which is unique, utterly different than that from which it is torn; the bad poet throws it into something which has no cohesion. A good poet will usually borrow from authors remote in time, or alien in language, or diverse in interest".-Eliot. TS. *Philip Massinger*. New York: The Sacred Wood. 2000.



Mahabharata epic. Similar interventions by Ezhuthachan occur in the episode concerning the mutilation of Surpanakha. In the original 'Adhyatma Ramayana' the chopping off of her ears and nose alone is mentioned. But Ezhuthachan, in his 'Adhyatma Ramayanam Kilippattu' has luridly added the breast to the list of mutilated organs.<sup>26</sup>The transcreation by Ezhuthachan in both cases shows marked departure from the original source texts.

For his frugality in the use of metaphors, Ulloor S Parameswara Iyer in his canonical Malayalam work on the literary history of Malayalam titled *Kerala Sahitya Charitram*, pays encomiums to Ezhuthachan where Iyer compares Ezhuthachan himself to an avatar or incarnation taking form to lay the foundation of the Malayalam literary sphere.

It goes to Ezhuthachan's credit that he did not subordinate rasa-bhava to metaphorical tropes. He did not attempt to be a magician with rhythmic sound effects of 'slesa.'<sup>27</sup> He never perplexed laymen with dense complicated grammar. He did not dabble in erotica or try to be a 'cultivated connoisseur' anxiety by using naked sringara or unravelled humour. He used his unparalleled expertise in narration to turn his readers into 'pure-hearted and enlightened souls.' This sort of textual reformative zeal has been unparalleled in the social history of Kerala.

According to Mahakavi Ulloor, "he effected a peaceful and universally entertaining revolution in the literary empire. With the incarnation of such a master, Kairali (Malayalam language) was enriched. Ordinary Keralites became literate and enriched. For similar feats this colossus comes first in the midst of Malayalam language poets." (Iyer, 560)

Ezhuthachan was not a translator of the original text of the 'Adhyatma Ramayanam.' Nor was he its transcreator. Rather, he was a transmitter (Kennelly, 142) of the work who took his own liberties with the text in creating local inflections and infusing the spirit of Bhakti. The term 'Ezhuthachan' literally means 'father of writing'. He literally was the father of writing in Malayalam in that he imbued the classical overtones in the original 'Adhyatma Ramayana' and rendered them into an amalgamation of local traditions including manipravalam (ruby and coral) and pattu(song) that could simply be understood by common folk.

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<sup>26</sup>According to A.K.Ramanujan, there are two types of mothers in Indian mythology-the breast mother and the tooth mother. Soorpanakha evidently is the former.

<sup>27</sup>Perhaps not to offend the more literary oriented Namboodiris.

Noted writers of each era have demolished monopolies on thought, restructured grand narratives and created their own independent space. Writers have always accomplished this surge through transgressing linguistic and cultural barriers and by resisting colonising attempts. ‘It was through a deployment of his genius in his wielding of language that Ezhuthachan was able to become at the same time an upholder of tradition, modernist among modernists and postmodernist among postmodernists. Whatever might be the truth behind epithets that qualify him as poets of the past-present-future and father of the Malayalam language, such glorification of him has arisen from this backdrop.’ (Sreedharan, 140)

In that portion of the ‘Adhyatma Ramayanam Kilippattu’ where Rama and Laxman meet the demon Kabandha, Ezhuthachan has presented the demon Kabandha as a body without organs, ie sans face, chest, limbs or head. This is in accordance with the concept of ‘the body without organs,’ Žižek’s critique of ideology pace Deleuze – the body without organs. It is not virtual reality, but ‘reality of the virtual’.

Later Sreerama, along with Sumitra’s son  
Sad, entered the forest forlorn, and  
Seeking Sita searching directions  
With ready courage, travelling the forest  
Came upon a creature in demon form  
Instantly Ramachandra uttered:  
“Sans face, chest and limbs  
And other organs what is this being?  
Laxman! You could be scared seeing this  
He could eat us up now know this  
That which is not bird or animal strange! strange!  
Has no face, chest arms or head  
Before the demon eats us up alive  
Ways to save us can’t be seen if you think of it.  
We are in the midst of his arms young man!  
That which is prepared by destiny will come about.”

(Ezhuthachan, Adhyatmaramayanam, 200.)

Ezhuthachan's Humanism:

Rather than a linear narrative of the hero's epic life, Ezhuthachan follows a cyclical structure of history in which the character of Srirama is a dharmic palimpsest of previous avatars of Vishnu. In the 'Mahabharatham Kilippattu', Lord Krishna, after the slaying of Jarasandha, liberates the Kings who had earlier been captured by Jarasandha. Before their liberation, Ezhuthachan inserts a 'half-page long Bhagavat Sthuthi.' (Balakrishnan, *The Art of Ezhuthachan* 51) This dharmic humanism, enabled Ezhuthachan to seamlessly craft an epic narrative that had taken place in a different space and time altogether. In such a context, significant is the process of translation that was followed by Ezhuthachan which involved the inter-personal dharma of language. "The task of the translator consists in finding that intended effect upon the language into which he is translating which produces in it the echo of the original." (Benjamin, 82).

This core of dialogic effervescence was captured in the 'Adhyatmaramayanam Kilippattu' that was transcreated by Ezhuthachan in Malayalam. The immense possibilities that were offered by the use of a conventional classical Sanskrit idiom in a fledgling tongue were eminently exploited by Ezhuthachan who beyond cyclical considerations deployed a vague sense of nationhood as well. The chemistry between word, sentence and text that was achieved by Ezhuthachan in the 'Adhyatmaramayanam Kilippattu' is a product of this synthesis of space and time across geographic and historic barriers. Asha Menon in fact calls Advaita, Ezhuthachan's major 'poetic element' (Menon, A. 45).

Thadakavadham:

The episode of the slaying of the demoness Thadaka by Rama is illustrated by Ezhuthachan as in the following excerpt. The nocturnal enchantress is in fact none other than a graceful 'yakshi' (spirit)<sup>28</sup> who has been cursed to assume her present form of an ogress. In Kerala yakshi can be sources of fear and veneration, tinged with a sense of the erotic. For example, in one of the major Vaishnavite shrines in Southern India, the Sree Padmanabhaswamy temple in Thiruvananthapuram in Kerala, there is supposed to be interred a yakshi called the Kanjirodu Yakshi. There are murals on the wall as well of this yakshi. (See Bayi)

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<sup>28</sup>There is a history of yakshi lore and yakshi worship in Kerala. CV. Raman Pillai in the beginning of his historical novel *Marthandavarma*, relates the tale of Kalliyankattu Neeli, a yakshi.

As they reached Thadaka forest later  
 Vishwamitra said assuming mystic smile  
 ‘Raghava!valiant warrior of truth!Rama!  
 Nobody traverses these roads for long time  
 Have you seen this forest? Lustful  
 Thadaka rules over this place.  
 For fear of whom no one walks here  
 Lord of the warth dwellers! Sustainer!  
 You have to slay her by any means  
 It won’t be sinful uttered the great sage  
 So Rama twanged his bow  
 And the world trembled then  
 Hearing the sound the angry ogress  
 Huge in form advanced to devour  
 Then shot an arrow Raghavan  
 Rama’s arrow struck her in the chest  
 As if a mountain fell wingless on earth  
 The terrifying Thadaka collapsed  
 And became visible gold and gem embellished form  
 Of a beautiful Yakshi herself became visible  
 Who had turned a creature of the night by curse  
 Reached heaven thus by command of lord Rama. (Ezhuthachan, Adhyatmaramayanam, 45)

Lakshmanopadesam:

The Lakshmanopadesam(advice given to Lakshmana) is one of the core and oft-quoted sections of the ‘Adhyatmaramayana Kilippattu.’ Rama advises his younger brother<sup>29</sup> Lakshmana on the fleeting and ephemeral nature of this world, which is the core message of mystical Bhakti. Ezhuthachan uses the word ‘bhoga’ for the lusts of the flesh and uses the metaphors for fleetingness of life such as that of a dew drop on molten metal and that of a frog being

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<sup>29</sup>In medieval Kerala, among the Brahmin caste of Namboodiris there existed a tradition in which the eldest males of the family alone married, with the younger brother forming temporary alliances called sambandham with Nair women. The character of Bhima in the Mahabharatha is another figure of the younger brother awaiting his turn.

swallowed by a snake trying to catch its prey. The movement from the inorganic metal to the organic amphibian is masterful and one that encompasses the evolving nature of the matrix of Bhakti in the medieval context. The development of medieval metallurgy and the prevalence of snake sanctuaries in Kerala are being pointed out here by Ezhuthachan who widens the scope of Bhakti to encompass all human endeavour.

Dear one! son of Sumitra! youngster! you must listen  
Leaving competitiveness, to my words  
Your philosophy I have grasped  
From early on, know this, within you  
Care and concern for me  
Exceeds anyone else's  
No deed is impossible for you  
That is certain, but still listen to this  
If the visible kingdom, body and the rest  
The world and remaining grains and wealth  
Be true, then your trouble is justified  
Otherwise what would be its purpose?  
All desires are fleeting, ephemeral,  
Rapidly one would lose lifespan, you remember.  
Like a drop of water on molten metal  
Human life is fleeting  
Like a toad being swallowed by a snake  
Seeks after its food  
The world in the grasp of time  
With bashful heart lusts after desires. (Ezhuthachan, Adhyatmaramayanam, 95).

The Laksmanopadesa section of the 'Adhyatmaramayanam Kilippattu' is significant for its quintessential core teaching of mystical Bhakti, regarding the fleeting and ephemeral nature of human life on earth with conjugal life, love, desire, lust and all other encumbrances. Asha Menon calls Ezhuthachan's style organic rather than majestic owing to its density of visionary moments. (Menon, A. 44) For such an invocation of Bhakti, Ezhuthachan had few forbears. The posterity in

Malayalam poetry has followed in his footsteps sans any anxiety. The incredible power that Ezhuthachan derives from his simple evocation of everyday Bhakti sets the tone for the rest of the Kavya. Ezhuthachan also introduces the dialogic human interactions and compares them to 'maya' using the metaphors of wayfarers residing at an inn and then going their separate ways and also floating logs of wood in a river. Floating logged wood in the river was a practice in medieval Kerala, where homesteads were built using logs felled from the tropical woods of the Western Ghats.

Here Ezhuthachan follows the organic flow of the floatsam-jetsam and links it to human lifespan and life situations as well as with the incredible diversity of Kerala's landscape that runs from mountains into plains into the coastal sea. Incredible though the range of Bhakti poetry is, Ezhuthachan takes care to retain the original material sources of his poetry that still resonate strongly with the geographical and physical landscape of Kerala. In terms of prosody, such a breath-taking rhythm is attempted by Ezhuthachan in the metre and rhyme as well, using native rhythms and not conventional Sanskrit metres, while retaining the Bhakti-core of the original Sanskrit 'Adhyatma Ramayana.'

The scenario that Ezhuthachan purports to describe is that of an elder brother compassionately advising his younger brother on the reality concerning life. But the elder brother also happens to be Sri Rama, an incarnation of Vishnu and his advice is imbued with a strong bhakti-consciousness that cannot fail to resonate with Malayalam readers of all time.

Such is the simplicity and power of the language that Ezhuthachan deploys in the dialogue between Rama and Lakshmana that it has certain characteristics of a Bhakti-romanticism, when coupled with the organic evocation of the landscape and flora and fauna and geographical features.

The three focal points where Ezhuthachan focuses the fleeting nature of human life are wealth, youth and love(including lust and desire and the corporeal realm). Here, Ezhuthachan's Bhakti enters a Zen-like sphere of absolute non-attachment. (The evolution of the Bhakti movement in poetry and Zen mysticism have been mutually exclusive. Yet, certain common points of overlap can be found between them. )

Ramabhakti and Krishnabhakti are the twin poles of Ezhuthachan's Bhakti and while Ramabhakti revolves around a renunciatory core, Krishnabhakti is more evolved around human desires and love (including lust).

According to Guy Beck, ‘Gita-Govinda became nearly synonymous with the proliferation of the arts and music associated with the Krishna cult. Its songs are still recited in the Jagannatha Temple at Puri, Guruvayoor Temple in Kerala; also in some temples of Mathura.’ (Beck, 135) The Guruvayoor temple in northern Kerala (Malabar) which is one of the major centres of Krishna-bhakti tradition in Kerala uses the poetry of Ezhuthachan in everyday rituals. In the private sphere as well, the poetry of Ezhuthachan has imbued Malayali life with its special significance, regimenting everyday life, including menstruation, cooking and conjugal acts. According to McKim Marriott, ‘Kerala householders locate some of their activities (cooking, entertaining, conserving, menstruating) at similarly propertied places within the cube they inhabit, but they also exploit the house’s contrasting properties by moving hot sexual activities to cool places and disorderly death to orderly places; they even counteract the house’s properties by putting light into the darkest region and by recycling life-sustenance through what would otherwise be the most polluted and inauspicious corner.’ (Marriott, 27)

A Malayalam colloquialism for something inauspicious or scandalous is ‘veettil kayattan pattathathu,’ or that which cannot be taken inside the house. There is a distinction between the inside and outside.<sup>30</sup> Ezhuthachan in this sense is eminently takeable inside the house. The following much quoted verses by Ezhuthachan are in simple Malayalam language, rather than in high flown and complexly phrased Sanskritized version. The eroticism is muted and yet not totally absent. It uses domestic similes related to the household such as ‘conjugal life is but a dream’, and ‘we are all wayfarers at an inn’. This deployment of local dialect adds to Ezhuthachan’s stature as Bhakti-romanticism’s exemplar. Repression stokes the libido. Bhakti is seldom repressive.

Sons, friends, wives, wealth and the rest  
Are short-lived remember this  
Like wayfarers staying in a wayside inn  
While tired, and then part ways  
Or like floating jetsam in a river  
Thus totally fleeting is this union

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<sup>30</sup> Žižek would illustrate the inside and outside rule with the example of a glob of saliva, normally swallowed all the time without any qualms, but when spat into a glass turning gross and impossible to ingest all of a sudden.

And wealth too is ephemeral for men  
Can youthfulness too stay for an eternity?  
Dreamlike is conjugal bliss for humans  
Lifespan too is short, think of this Lakshmana!  
Turbulent with love and the rest this life  
If you think about it is just a dream my friend! (Ezhuthachan, Adhyatmaramayanam, 96).

Sisir Kumar Das opines that the Bhakti that originated in medieval South India (Tamil Nadu) was different from the already existing constant thread of Bhakti running through classical Sanskrit scholarship, which he terms as Upanishadic Bhakti.

Whereas Upanishadic Bhakti is more calm, controlled, quiet and meditative, and Apollonian, the medieval Bhakti of South India, while far from being Dionysian, was more intense, emotional, visceral and popular and local in its use of idioms. According to Vasudha Narayanan, 'in Srivaisnava literature, lila is a celebration of the Lord's magnificence made manifest through creation; it is also a celebration of the intimate and passionate love that he has for Sri and for his devotees. Thus, the multiple meanings of Lila as the sport of creation and love play are not mutually incompatible.' (Narayanan, 179)

Krishna's antics as well as Rasakreeda in the 'Krishnagadha' are instances of play. T.Bhaskaran says that 'it is said in the Bhagavatha that Krishna made the cowherd boys laugh, by his witty remarks. Cherusseri slightly modifies it and says that Krishna did so just when the boys were putting the morsel of food into their mouths. Great is the difference of effect produced by this change. In Bhagavatha it is said that Krishna entertained the Gopis by resorting to his Yogamaya. Cherusseri makes the reference to Maya more effective by saying that by immersing in it Krishna became a youth. This really introduces a great difference in the appeal of rasakrida'. (Bhaskaran, 200)

The medieval Bhakti of South India had an emotional vitality which could almost be termed as 'romantic.' It used the language of emotions expressed in local dialects and not Sanskrit. Whereas Sanskrit scholarship valorised pan-Indian deities like Shiva and Krishna, the medieval Bhakti of South India used in its versions local deities like the Chennamallikarjuna (lord white as jasmine) of Akka Mahadevi. A major local bhakti cult in Kerala is that of Ayyappan(Sasthav).



The terseness and laconic nature of a pan-Indian and classical Sanskrit tradition is sacrificed in favour of a more popular form of poetry melodious in form, content and spirit. The spiritual manifestation of medieval Bhakti of South India remarkably varies from earlier attempts to codify in terms of local beliefs, a universal conception of deity. While formerly such attempts had taken on the form of philosophical schools like Sree Sankaracharya's Advaita, Bhakti departs from this earlier school of thought by introducing a new subjective element in its method of expression, viz. Emotion.

Emotion that is discerned in Bhakti poetry of medieval South India is more immediate, affective and remarkably simpler than earlier classical incarnations of the same in Sanskrit and Tamil. Bhakti in Malayalam did not have such a corpus of classical lore. According to the Narada Bhakti Sutra, an early work on Bhakti literature, Bhakti is the ultimate love towards the Lord (parama premarupa). The 6<sup>th</sup> c Tamil 'Paripatal'<sup>31</sup> contains verses devoted to the deities Tirumal and Murukan which can be among the first Bhakti verses, even though the Bhagavat Gita also says 'Bhava Madbhakto' and devotes an entire section(12) to bhakti.

The Bhakti poet as radical polemicist was alien to Kerala, where tradition and erudition came to be prioritized. According to Sisir Kumar Das, Bhakti was not a novelty, a street-side freak show of eccentrics in India. Bhakti was not alien to Indian theology. But in the medieval period, it acquired different tonalities from the classically infused Sanskrit Bhakti. 'No longer the calm and controlled, quiet and meditative emotion of the upanishadic period, it was an outburst of emotion leading to a frenzy, like the storm lashing at the mountains or forest tops or ocean surging and foaming on the sandy shore. It was an 'ecstasy,' it was the frenzy that nourished a new genre of poetry.' (Das, History, 30-31)

In medieval South India, Bhakti literature in its initial stages consisted of three major works composed among others by the Alvars and Nayanars: The Srimat Bhagavatham, Nalayira Divya Prabandham and the Tevaram (which literally means 'Devaharam' or the God's garland compiled by Nampi-Antar-Nampi under the Chola regime of King Rajaraja Chola). The 'Nalayira Divya Prabandham' was a compilation of 4000 devotional songs composed by the twelve Alwar saints. Malayalam bhakti seems anaemic in comparison.

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<sup>31</sup>AK Ramanujan mentions this in his 'Hymans to the Drowning' a work on the Vaishnava Alvar saints. Alvars means 'the immersed ones'.

The most significant work however is the ‘Srimat Bhagavatham’, in which a long literary tradition of Krishna Bhakti reaches its pinnacle. It has been said that the ‘Srimat Bhagavatham’ marked the ‘supreme literary expression of a new kind of Bhakti.’ This kind of Bhakti was different from the nonchalant Upanishadic Bhakti found in the Bhagavat Gita which is a chapter in the epic Mahabharata. Ezhuthachan also composed a ‘Devi Bhagavatham’ although the ascription of its authorship to him beyond doubt would seem too pat. The medieval Bhakti movement in South Indian literature is the product of centuries of socio-economic and political churning that inevitably reflected in the religious asphere. Ezhuthachan, Cherusseri and Poonthanam were influenced by the Srimat Bhagavatha and to a lesser extent by the Bhagavata Purana.

Religion being an inseparable part of day-to-day life in the medieval South India of the Alwars and Nayanars, also had its influence on the literature of the day. The ‘Tevaram’ and ‘Nalayira Divya Prabandham’ are cumulative products or anthologies of over four centuries of Bhakti imagination in Southern India. According to Sisir Kumar Das, ‘they presented the final stage of stability attained by the Bhakti movement and the literature that it produced. Any understanding of them therefore requires some information about the life of the poet-saints, the Alwars and the Nayanmars.’ (Das, History, 31)

In Kerala on the other hand, the works of Bhakti were never anthologized. Nor were the biographies of the poets themselves stressed upon. In fact, apart from some local legends, hardly anything is known about the personal and conjugal lives of Ezhuthachan, Poonthanam, Cherusseri or Melpathur. It has to be surmised that the Kerala Bhakti poets lived textual lives for themselves.

Within the complex matrix of caste and socio-economic criteria in Medieval South India, the moorings of the various Bhakti saints and litterateurs become significant. ‘KN Panikkar also concurs that there has been an intense fusion of the Aryan and the Dravidian in Kerala. So for instance the Brahmins have assimilated ancestor worship and serpent worship into their religious praxis.’ (Gabriel, 26) In terms of a caste analysis, the medieval Bhakti movement of South India was not an anti-caste or anti-Brahminical phenomenon that sought to thwart the supremacy of Sanskrit in classical learning. According to Kamil Zvelebil, the great Czech scholar of Bhakti, whose reflections were influenced by Jakobson, the radical postures of Bhakti were post facto creations, since ‘there is no fight for freedom and equality on behalf of the oppressed. Only the devotees of Siva are equal.’ (Zvelebil. ‘The Smile of Murugan’, 194). But medieval bhakti could

be called a 'spiritual democracy' without argument. It was ecumenical in this respect. It was not a social democracy since 'about 35% of the saints were Brahmins (eg. Sambandhar, Sundarar, Periyalwar etc.) about 35% of Ksatriya origin (Kulasekhara Alwar, Tirumangar Alwar etc.), about 20% of Vellala origin (eg. Appar, Nammalvar) and about 5% are unknown origin (Andal, for example, was found as a baby in the garden of Periyalwar).' (Zvelebil, qtd in Das, History, 50)

### **Bhakti and Eroticism:**

The counterpoint to Bhakti in the medieval period would be eroticism in classical poetry. Bhakti itself was imbued with eroticism, but it became one with a certain kind of divine ecstasy. There was no separation between the body-spiritual and the body-erotic when Akka Mahadevi sang that 'burn all mortal husbands in the oven, the only one immortal is my lord white as jasmine.'

The idea of erotic love was adequately developed in the Sanskrit tradition of the time that it was just impossible for it not to seep into the current of Bhakti. "Chaurisurata Panchashika' by Bilhana, a Kashmiri poet had stanzas written in the metre Vasantatilakam which means 'ornament of the spring' and begins with the word adyapi as the connecting link between them." (Das, History, 112)

The anecdotal nature of much of medieval Bhakti is shared by medieval eroticism also in the sense that incidents in the conjugal or erotic or romantic lives of poets form the crux of the situations described in the verses composed in Sanskrit metre, which are meant not to be titillating but merely to be illuminating of the general human condition, a trait that it shares with much of Bhakti literature also. The poet himself/herself is the vessel of eroticism and Bhakti. It is his/her subjective spiritual or erotic ecstasies that are framed by the verses rendered in improvised or classical metre. The bhakti poet whose amorous propensities were inclined in a divine orientation, was often at a disadvantage.

The shackles of social opprobrium were raised by Bhakti as well as erotic poetry. Terming the literary movement initiated by the Bhakti movement as eccentric based on the personal lifestyles of individual Bhakti saints would be missing the point. Ezhuthachan was called 'drunkard' just as Chaitanya was called 'mad elephant.' (See Das, Mad Lover)

Bhakti operated in the unceasing and endless continuum between the corporeal and the spiritual. Legends and anecdotal nuggets that have become part of the corpus of medieval erotic and

Bhakti literatures, vouch for the spiritual nature of eroticism and the erotic nature of spirituality in a commingled mesh of mutual literary sustenance. Eroticism is relatively tame or mute in the medieval Bhakti poetry of Kerala. The Srngara rasa was often used in conjunction with bhakti or was confused for bhakti. This served as a means for encapsulating bhakti in corporeal love. But the staunchly robust eroticism of Bhartrhari and Bilhana is alien to Ezhuthachan, Poonthanam or Cherusseri. The fragmented political milieu and lack of centralised political patronage together with a matrilineal social set up must have dissuaded poets from developing sophisticated modes of erotic expression as in Sanskrit.

The story behind how Bilhana came to compose his famous erotic poem 'Chaurisurata Panchasikha', is illustrative, (as is Ezhuthachan's almost total aversion to the erotic sentiment.) Bilhana (11<sup>th</sup> c. CE) fell in love with a princess, the daughter of Kashmir King Mandanarama. The enraged king ordered his execution. Bilhana thus composed the 'Chaurapanchasikha'. The poem had 50 stanzas written as a point of death testimony. It goes like 'Even now/while awaiting death I/She weak with fatigue the body of she/while on pale cheeks swarms of curls falling/ trying to hide the guilt of she/around my neck clung/ the soft arms of she/remember I the love of she' and later on the more spiritually inflected, 'She don't know I/ if Shiva's mate she be,/or by Indras curse a nymph coming to earth/or Lakshmi the consort of Krishna be/To beguile the world did Brahma create she/or driven by desire was he/ the perfect jewel of maidenly youth to behold was he'. (Bilhana, Web)

These were defiant, pathetic and erotic at the same time, describing the poet's concupiscent pleasures enjoyed in the company of the princes. Sisir Kumar Das says that, 'The king was impressed both by his poetic prowess and devastating courage. Needless to say, that the king condones the sentence and married the princess to him. None but the brave deserves the fair' (Das, History, 112).

The story mentioned above concerns the bravado of the poet Bilhana who composed erotic verses about a princess while awaiting execution. It forms the counterpoint to the ecstasy of the Alwar or Nayanar poet or Poonthanam for that matter, in seeking union with the deity in Bhakti. But the reckless spirit that animates them both is nonetheless the same. The geist of spiritual ecstasy is not idealised since it overlaps with the ecstasy of the corporeal body that is subject to various ailments including death and desire. According to Corinne Dempsey, 'absorption into the

divine, or samadhi, is typically a state reserved for the moment when the bhakti practitioner's earthly life has ended. By contrast, the yogic adept commonly identifies samadhi as the highest goal' (Dempsey, 128).

It is relevant to note here that while Bhakti poets used local dialects and metres of their own conception like Keka, Annanada, Kalakanchi, Manjari and Kakali, the poets of the body-erotic, like Bilhana used classical and complex Sanskrit metres like Vasanthathilakam. Bhakti therefore accepted the human body in its non-ideal manifestations while at the same time sublating it in union with the deity. The human body with all the ills, lusts, diseases it is heir to is not untouchable to the Bhakti poet, who uses the very same corporeal realm to get in close touch with the divine apparatus.

Such is the superiority of bhakti over mere eroticism that in early medieval texts such as the Srimad Bhagavatam the erotic sensuality of Krishna-Bhakti is evoked without veering into mere eroticism devoid of spiritual passion or Bhakti. The subtle sensuality of Krishna bhakti can be found in the 'Krishnagadha' of Cherusseri.

According to AK.Ramanujan, the early Bhakti poets in medieval South India, used to improvise in their works of literature. Much of it was contingent on circumstances. Thus gradually they changed the Vedic and Upanishadic notions that existed. They also used Jaina and Buddhist concepts which were in existence at that time. Romantic Tamil conceptions and classical Sanskrit ones were synthesised. They all became one in the cauldron of Bhakti. Dominique-Sila Khan opines that Dharmasastha or Ayyappan, the most popular deity in Kerala could be an incarnation of Buddha or the same as Buddha. The words *dharma* and *sharanam* have Buddhist etymology. 'Around 8<sup>th</sup> c. When Buddhism was on the decline, during the philosopher Shankaracharya's time, Buddha was integrated into the Brahmanic pantheon in the form of Sastha.' (Khan, 57)

Malayalam did not have the anthologizing streak of Tamil bhakti poetry, which produced the 'Nalayira Divya Prabandham', compiled by Natha Muni. When the devotional verses on Tirumal and Murugan were composed, a new era was being inaugurated, when the classical Sanskrit as well as Sangam traditions segues into a new mode of frenzied devotion. This occurred between the sixth and ninth centuries CE. Ramanujan credits the golden age of the Guptas (320-550 CE) with having laid the base for the later development of bhakti. The kings themselves were called

Bhagavathas. Lakshmi was embossed on the obverse of coins, and so was Varaha, as numismatic evidence tells us. The state became preoccupied with myth in a positive sense that we are unable to grasp in the modern secular era, as Talal Asad would say. 'The Guptas sponsored Visnu and almost believed that Visnu sponsored the Gupta Empire. Krsna as a god with his own cults emerged in the later Gupta period. Official forms of Hindu mythology were set down in great syncretic texts called puranas. Visnu, Siva, their families, minions and enemies seem to have become as real as the human dynasties.' (Daniels-Ramanujan, 103-04)

AK. Ramanujan views the Bhakti movement in South India as being part of a pan-Indian reaction against the hegemony of Sanskrit language and power structures. Bhakti according to him arose from a historic synthesis of Sanskrit religion and mythology with romantic and folk elements in Tamil. Sanskrit was an imperial language with its smrti-Vedas and Upanishads. Tamil highlighted or foregrounded itself against this classical background, though Tamil too had imperial ambitions and was a classically inflected tongue. Concerns of Tamil were not religious, but feminine and monarchical. Hinduism in India (the Vedic religion) was being articulated in a new paradigm. In Kerala there was the literary influence of Manipravalam.

According to AK.Ramanujan, the very first major poem in the medieval South Indian tradition is Tirumurukarruppatai, 'A Guide to Lord Murukan.' It was composed in the 6<sup>th</sup> century. it synthesises traditional Tamil ideas of heroism to classical Sanskrit mythology. Murukan is a south Indian local deity and not pan-Indian. He represents values such as vigour, valour, bravery, vitality, beauty and love. Murukan, a warlike god can also be warlike at times.

Bhakti poems can be anecdotal. In the case of the very first Bhakti poem, it concerns the poet Nakkirar who was kidnapped by a demon and meant to be his 1000<sup>th</sup> victim. Then Lord Murukan appears and slays the demon and rescues his devotee from the cave where he was being kept. The poem supposedly was written in the cave itself and has the capability to save anyone who chanted it in times of trouble, as a devotee of Muruka. The poem is a bridge between classical (included in the tens songs anthology) and Bhakti (being anthologized in 'Tirumurai'). It is an 'aruppatta', a 'puram' poem of guidance, in which one singer directs another one towards a benevolent overlord who would serve as a patron. Here the feudal lord is replaced with God. Murugan is both the romantic mate as well as the divine Lord. This is Tamil meeting Sanskrit on its own terms and creating a theology of its own. Thus Bhakti becomes the expression of Vedic religion in Tamil.

In the facing of fear  
His faces, faces of comfort, appear;  
In the battlefield, his lance  
Says, “Do not fear!”  
Think of him once in your heart:  
He will appear twice  
To anyone who says, “Muruka!” (Daniels-Ramanujan, 112)

The poem quoted by Ramanujan comprises six parts. Each of these poems guides the reader to a place of pilgrimage related to Murukan such as a temple. Murukan has six faces and these six parts of the poem are supposed to correspond to them. This is a typical mystic trope. Here Tamil tropes and motifs are more significant than the classical Sanskrit traditions. The Trimurthis (Visnu, Siva, Brahma) and Indra are secondary to Murukan, a local god, here. According to Ramanujan there is a ‘double espousal’ of Murukan which is significant because he has two muses. One is Devayani (Teyvayanai) who is ideal, heavenly and represents Sanskrit and the second consort is Valli, who is earthly and represents Tamil.

According to Sheldon Pollock, localization of spoken language (Vernacularization) in medieval South Asia was a profound aesthetic as well as political process. This change in the public sphere was similar to the cosmopolitan changes that took place in the Sanskrit cosmopolis. But it helped bring about a ‘new regime of culture and power that is still imperfectly understood,’ of which Bhakti poetry was but a part. In Kerala, Manipravalam was a major cog in the process of vernacularization.

It goes without saying that such transformations were often mercantile and secular in nature without the direct intervention of religion due to the process of ‘regional vernacularization.’ The dominant idiom of classical Sanskrit was set aside in favour of values that pre-existed the Sanskrit cosmopolis. Along with Sanskrit were set aside classical traditions of individual authorship, text, genre and patronage that existed since the Vedic times. Religious identities became regional, an example of which is Virashaivism. It changed from a bhakti oriented evangelical socio-religious philosophical movement to a Brahmin subcaste.

Sheldon Pollock says ‘ the new vernacularism, then –noncosmopolitan, regional, desi in outlook-combined a different, local way of poetry making with a different, local way of spiritual being.’(Pollock, 436) Important features in the histories of the Kannada and Gujarati literary cultures were paralleled in many other regions. Pollock establishes that Kannada and Gujarati experiences were ‘replicated in Assam by Shanker Deva and then by Madhav Kandali and in Northern India by Kabir Das and Braj poets of ritikal and then in the island of Java, where Sanskritized Kakawin was elided by the local Kidung. But Telugu retained its classicism’ (Pollock, 435).

According to Sheldon Pollock, there is but a faintly loose correlation between the advent of the popular form of Bhakti literature and the vernacularization of languages spoken in medieval India. Quoting Kannada sources, he argues that the link that is often assumed between the local emergences of vernacular tongues and the theologically oriented Bhakti movement are tenuous at best. The same lack of correlation applies not only to Kannada speaking regions, but to the whole of South Asia. Moreover, the vernacularization in South Asia was not anti-Brahminical. Vernacularization even contradicts anti-Brahminical traits. Sheldon Pollock cites the celebrated example of Madhav Kandali, who like Ezhuthachan in Malayalam, transcreated the Ramayana into Assamese in 1350. The producer of the Assamese version of Ramayana was not only a ‘pandit’, he also repudiated any inclinations towards devotionalism, calling it but a worldly tale (devavani nuhi ito laukika he katha). So as to compensate for this apparent lack of devotion in Madhav Kandali’s Ramayana, the poem was later reworked by adding religious devotion and sentiment.

According to Pollock, the Malayalam works like ‘Vaishikathantram’, ‘Achicharitam’ were some of the initial texts in Malayalam, and were secular sans theological frailties. So was Ilango Adikal’s ‘Chilappathikaram’ totally devoid of religious elements. (Pollock, 428-29) The influx of religious devotion was a medieval era popular mode.

In the Tamil country as well as in Kerala, the vernacularization and the gradual sidelining of Sanskrit from literary composition was a complex process. Tamil, according to Sheldon Pollock had categories that differentiated between correct and colloquial Tamil, even before the advent of Sanskrit inspired marga-desi binary, which he says must not be conflated with the other major dichotomy of the great and little traditions of India. Cosmopolitanism of the marga-desi traditions and the coral and ruby (manipravalam), which almost became a highly stylized literary



language in Kerala, has to be noted. Cosmopolitanism took root since ‘in Kerala beginning in the late fourteenth century yet another category or indeed language, *manipravala*, functioned as the principal rubric under which varieties of the cosmopolitan style were identified’.(Pollock, 409)

Sheldon Pollock also argues that in the Sanskrit cosmopolis there was no room for region-specific socio-political or cultural salience. Regional variations were subsumed under the rubric of classical Sanskrit even though cosmopolitanism thrived, it was not a multi-culturalism in a post-modern sense of the term. The Bengali and Malayalam versions of the Sanskrit epic Mahabharata remain faithful to the Sanskrit original and show no variation in dialect or rituals or points of view or ideologemes based on regional disparities. Local literary formations were viewed as being inalienable parts of a global discourse. Such glocal currents were common and Malayalam, spoken in Kerala, was not a stranger to such cross currents. Pollock opines that even in the 12<sup>th</sup> c. CE, it was possible for local literary currents to be placed within a global cosmopolis of Sanskrit. Regions were distinct as cultural entities, but there was no specificity or singular identity. The famed Sanskrit cosmopolis imbued everything. There was no ‘Malayali cultural practice’ in the Malayalam version of Mahabharata. (Pollock, 405) This started with the advent of Bhakti. Though *desadharmas* were recognized, the region was culturally as well as politically encompassed by the global, universal imperium of Sanskrit.

### **Orality:**

Cherusseri, Poonthanam and Ezhuthachan must have received instruction in Vedic chanting and other aural techniques. The primacy of Ezhuthachan is due to the variety of his metrical craft, which includes Keka, Kakali, Kalakanchi and Annanada, classified together as Kilippattu. The recitation of ‘Adhyatma Ramyanam’ in Kerala during Karkidakam and in temples and households, creates an aural commons. The textual transmission of Malayalam scripture was through palm leaf manuscripts as well as songs. In the present-day CDs and other optical and magnetic media are popular in the spread of the ‘Adhyatma Ramayanam’.

Tamil metres like ‘akaval’ demanded fixed phrases that were pre-set. Heroic personalities were characterized by adjectives. These served as anchors that fixed them in time. However, Ramanujan states that there is no reason to equate formulaic and traditional with oral in the context of ancient Tamil poetics. Oral traditions often comprised of writers as well. In

transitional periods between orality and full-fledged writing techniques, writing emerges as a stop-gap solution to record poetry for the sake of posterity. (Daniels-Ramanujan, 273)

Kumaravyasa, the author of the 15<sup>th</sup> century Mahabharata in Kannada says that his merit consists in not ‘deleting a word after writing it down’ and also his ‘never-ceasing stylus.’ Here Kumaravyasa is referring to the oral tradition which is rigid in terms of the sanctity of the oral text for fear of corruption through errors creeping in during repetition.

### **Ravana Vilapa**

Unlike Cheeraman, Ezhuthachan depicts Rama and Ravana in contrasting shades of brightness and black. Ravana is a figure of bad karma, to be despised. From the non-dichotomous ‘Ramacharitam’ of Cheeraman to the ‘Adhyatma Ramayana’ of Ezhuthachan, the ideology of Bhakti comes full circle. Whereas in Cheeraman, it is the women who bewail the slain Ravana, in Ezhuthachan, it is the dying Ravana himself who laments his lot and that of his son. In that abject state, Ravana too is a bhakta. Ezhuthachan depicts the bewailing of the demon Ravana. Ezhuthachan says that Ravana fell down and collapsed out of ‘moha’ or worldly desire on hearing about the demise of his son Meghnad. Ravana bewails his own bad karma and cites that as the reason for the misfortunes befalling his son. Ravana is also apprehensive that his name will not be as fearsome anymore since his son has been slain in the battlefield by the forces of Rama. Ravana then accuses Sita of being responsible for the death of his son and he ventures out to shed Sita’s blood. Sita starts chanting the name of Rama to escape his onslaught.

Thus whilst conversing amongst each other  
Ravana came to know of his son’s death  
Fell on earth mixed with ‘moha’  
Tired and then started wailing  
“ha ha little one!Mandodari’s dear one  
Ha ha beautiful one! Brave!graceful  
What have been my bad karma?can’t be said  
Sorrow within that I forget today  
For kings, twice-born and sages  
Won’t it be possible to sleep well today

None will fear me after this and mine  
 Birth has been futile my Lord!"  
 Recounting his son's merits and thinking  
 Swelling with sorrow he began to cry  
 "my son's death has happened  
 Because of Sita, and therefore I  
 Killing her and drinking her blood  
 Till then no cure for this sorrow mine."  
 Swirling his sword and roaring and laughing  
 Set off then the cruel Ravana.  
 Sita too saw the angry Ravana  
 Frightened and with tremulous body  
 Ha, Rama! Rama! Chanting Rama's name (Ezhuthachan, Adhyatmaramayanam, 397).

#### **DEBATE BETWEEN HANUMAN AND SUGREEVA:**

Ezhuthachan also into his Bhakti poem inserts a rational dialogue between Hanuman and Sugreeva, the apelike chieftains. In this conversation, Hanuman addresses Sugreeva as the Indra of the apes and convinces him to the immense grace bestowed upon him in the form of the favour shown him by Rama. Hanuman also tells him of the possibility of Sugreeva becoming the ruler of the apes after the demise of Bali. Thus Hanuman is tempting Sugreeva with an offer. But for the Bhakti poet, it is only natural to side with the forces of Rama. It is not a base temptation that is offered by Hanuman to Sugreeva, but rather the prospect of divine grace in the form of Rama's grace.

Thus while reigning one day  
 Ruling in the city of Kishkindha  
 Sugreeva was addressed by wind's son  
 "Listen Indra of apes! To words to your  
 Liking that I am about to utter carefully.  
 You were prioritized by righteous Raghu  
 Put before everything by truthful Purushottam  
 But you were not mindful of any of these

So it seems to me in my mind.  
Bali, great champion king of apes,  
Popular in all 3 worlds, friend to king of lords  
Died owing to you, by force  
Were matters advanced for him.  
You, after coronation, worshipped  
By people reign as a star  
How long this would last  
Contemplate, think of this thou (Ezhuthachan, Adhyatmaramayanam, 236).

The soul of Ezhuthachan's poetry is Bhakti. Though it can be said generally that he is a devotee of Vishnu for praising Krishna in one work and Rama in the other, plainly speaking, he is a Vishnu bhakta. In the 'Adhyatma Ramayana' after worshipping Ganapati and Saraswati, the poet focuses on the Krishna avatar by saying that 'in the Vrisni clan was born as Krishna, Vishnu who is soul of universe, bless especially.' In the beginning of the 'Mahabharatha Kilippattu' the poet entreats the bird (kili) thus: 'quenching your thirst and hunger, relate soon, the tender deity Krishna, his story,' and towards the end of the poem, 'prostrates before the lotus-eyed Krishna, the hero of Bharatha.'

A sthayibhava called 'bhakti' had not been invented by Indian theorists of metaphor. They gave the rasasthana to the bhava of santha anchored in vairagya. Ramayana and Bharatha are believed to be kavyas based on the santha rasa. Ramayana does not end with Srirama's coronation nor does Mahabharatha end with victory in the battle of Kurukshetra.

As they descent from those 'climaxes' to 'Uttaramayanam' and 'Uttarabharatham' it is also a departure from the rasa principle built up until then. It ends in the realm of santha of vairagya towards life. But Ezhuthachan and other bhakti poets did not give much importance to the santha rasa. For them these stories are the 'leela' of a favourite deity.

An 'avatar' imbues these stories like a hero of 'romance' does. The poet serves as interpreter to the heroic deeds. The hero's compassion and his kindness towards dependents, and his persistence; such 'gunas' are praised according to the situation. The hero's frailties are either covered up or ignored. Such being the situation, the bhakti bhava in these poets, does not have

the facade of religious-minded and virakti-oriented respect. They are more inclined towards the allegories of superhuman characters. This means that Rama and Krishna of Ezhuthachan are not different from traditional Indian concept. This proves that the sthayibhava in Ezhuthachan's works is utsaha and not virakti. When read in this manner, the bhakti of Ezhuthachan merges with veera rasa and Ezhuthachan becomes a first-rate heroic poet. Of the many qualities that separate Ezhuthachan from his predecessors, bhakti, language reform and cultural orientation are the major ones. Cultural orientation comes last in this list. Out of the remaining two, Bhakti has the premier position and it has the status of being the soul of rasa, and that rasa is veera rasa.

Medieval Kerala was a hierarchical society, ruled by the caste system, where Robin Jeffrey records citing sources that, an Ezhava had to maintain 36 paces away, and a person belonging to the Pulaya caste 96 paces, from a Brahmin. The same was 12 and 66 from a Nair person. There was not just untouchability, but also unseeability'. (Jeffrey, 9-10) There were rigid rituals and spatial demarcations and customs forged in the smithy of caste. People belonging to the lower strata were required by law to keep a certain distance from the touchable castes. This was taken to an extreme and even the shadow of a lower-caste person could 'pollute.' Even in modern times it has been called a madhouse. Bhakti marked a radical departure. For example, 'it is mentioned in the 'Skanda Purana' that Parasurama converted some fishermen into Brahmins by cutting off the hooks from their fishing lines and adorning the lines on their shoulders as the sacred thread. The fact that many Namputhiris look no different from the lower Dravidian castes in their physiognomy seems to corroborate this fact.' (Gabriel, 13) In a caste-ridden society, the Bhakti movement which came with the 'Adhyatmaramayanam' was a whiff of fresh air. The Bhakti movement in Kerala was spearheaded by Thunchathu Ezhuthachan, Cheruseri Namboodiri and Poonthanam Namboodiri. The Bhakti movement helped destabilize the entrenched caste system. Bhakti exposed the rotten structure of the caste system on which was built the edifice of medieval caste-ridden Kerala.

Bhakti poetry and the Bhakti movement in general were not rhetorical. It was an outpouring of the devotional spirit. The devotee, whether Cheruseri or Poonthanam, felt humbled by the majesty of the deity and in that spirit of submission there was no place for twice-born caste pride.

Poonthanam was married for a long time without issue. As a result of long propitiation of Guruvayoorappan, a son was born to him. A sumptuous feast and celebration was

organized for the naming ceremony. But amidst the preparations, the child was neglected and it died in a freak accident involving the cradle. Poonthanam was disillusioned and spent the rest of his life composing verses in praise of Krishna. The incident bears uncanny resemblance to the one in Freud where the burning son appears in his dad's dream. "Dass das Kind an Seinem Bett Steht, that the child is near its bed, ihn an Arme fast, takes him by the arm and whispers to him reproachfully, und ihm vorwurfsvoll zuraunt, vater siehst du den nicht, father can't you see, dass ich verbrenne, that I'm burning?" (quoted in Lacan, p58). (Nizarudeen, 44).

Bhakti movement thus exposed the hollowness of caste pride. Poets like Poothanam Namboodiri used the Bhakti idiom to coruscate the meaningless social conventions centered around caste and class and privilege. He used the religious idiom to help dismantle the structures imposed by religion. Bhakti movement gave the downtrodden access to the vedic tradition. Bhakti poetry gave confidence to the downtrodden. It was a major change in the Kerala society. It gave self-dignity to people on the margins who were cast away from the centre of society, and who were stamped as inferior and were oppressed, base and slaves. Bhakti proclaimed the spiritual equality of all. Bhakti ideology upheld that devotion is the devotee's hallmark, whether Brahmana or Chandala. Both of them have the same atman. Therefore there are no untouchables.

You speak of caste?Whatever his birth affirms,  
Lowborn, or Brahmin as his books confirm,  
Unless that he be born without a tongue,  
Or else by evil chances rendered dumb-  
Of all the countless names which praise the Lord,  
If daily he says one, just that one word-  
Says it when sitting at his tranquil ease,  
Or says it in a dream of passing peace,  
Or says it lightly, in some mirthful pause,  
Or says it rightly, in another's cause,  
Says it but once, utters it with his speech-  
Wherever he be, the Lord is in his reach.  
Why even that?If some day, at some hour

The brave accents fall gently on his ears-  
At that moment his humanfate bears fruit,  
At that moment he gains the Absolute. (Poonthanam, in Subramaniam (ed.)69).

It is interesting that Bhakti posits no separate origin myths. It adopted a more rational and logical position in term of origin of humankind. Bhakti stated that if the human body is built from the five elements (wind, water, earth, sky and fire) the same elements go into the making of all human beings and hence there is no rational basis for the hierarchy based on caste.

According to George Pati, 'Based on the 'Keralamahatmyam' and 'Keralolpatti', according to Kerala historian Kesavan Veluthat and TK. Gangadharan, Parasurama created the land between Gokarnam and Kanyakumari and settled Brahmins there in 64 gramas, or settlements'. (Pati, 205-06)

There are no separate elements for the various castes and classes and the elements comprising the Chandala body will tomorrow flow into the Brahmin body and vice versa and the universe as a whole is an aggregation of such flows, and therefore pride based on this physical body is false. This position of Bhakti was nothing short of a revolutionary proclamation of the Vedic principle unknown to mere mechanical chanters of the Vedas. By making knowledge more accessible, Bhakti poets created a mini renaissance in medieval Kerala. The darkness of unknowing created by the caste system was gradually dispelled. Thus the stage was set for the development of a progressive society. It gave poets a sense of purpose, which agenda has been taken on even by modern poets like Kumaran Asan who worked with Sree Narayana Guru. It was through the works of Ezhuthachan that Malayalam gained widespread recognition and freed itself from the shackles of Sanskrit and Tamil. According to Poojappura Krishnan Nair, 'Malayalam language poetry became a matter of prestige and the tradition of viewing Malayalam language poets as half-poets came to an end. The contribution of birdsong (kilippattu) and bhakti movement to the development of art forms like Kathakalai cannot be understated.' (Nair, PK 346)

There is a school of thought which claims that Ezhuthachan resorted to the technique of birdsong (kilippattu) to escape the tragic fate of the protagonists of the Ramayana. But scholars like Poojappura Krishnan Nair would reject this claim, positing instead that it was Ezhuthachan's 'sukamarga.' The bird of Ezhuthachan could be the bird of parasakti.

Bhakti poets' dismantling of the caste edifice through their writings was not a conscious rhetorical strategy. Rather they themselves were embedded within the system and were ardent devotees. Ezhuthachan wrote his masterpiece called 'Adhyatmaramayanam' in the local language, Malayalam. But he was very much aware of the local tongue's relative inferiority compared to Sanskrit. Though a Malayalam language writer, and nowadays called the 'father of the Malayalam language,' Ezhuthachan was a scholar of Sanskrit and had a partiality for the classical tongue.

Malayalam for Ezhuthachan, was the language of his fellowmen whereas Sanskrit was the language of the Gods, to be venerated. He created a language 'policy' for himself based on this binary. This was a policy that has stood him in good stead. The modern Malayalam language, which he helped create contains a profusion of Sanskritic elements compared to other South Indian languages, except Telugu.

Just like medieval Telugu poets, their counterparts in Kerala also infused a certain degree of humour into their poetry, a tradition reaching its peak with Kunjan Nambiar in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. One of the reasons cited for Cherusseri not being considered as the preceptor of Malayalam language (though he preceded Ezhuthachan) is the profusion of humour in his work, the other being the monotony of his poetic metre. (Shanmugam, 5)

But Ezhuthachan himself did not venture such a fusion of the divine Sanskrit and the 'lowly' Malayalam. Rather he believed in a separation of the two and used them for different purposes. It needs to be stressed that the realms of Malayalam and Sanskrit were separated by Ezhuthachan. For serious devotional verse and major plot episodes, he used Sanskrit, sometimes he made minor allowances and used 'Manipravalam' or the ruby and coral language which was a literary fusion of Malayalam and Sanskrit. This was a highly intricate language and had its rules codified in 'Leelathilakam' by Bhaskaracharya<sup>32</sup>. When Ezhuthachan used the ruby and coral language, he stuck to the rules laid down by Bhaskaracharya. Thus Ezhuthachan differentiated between the two languages.

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<sup>32</sup>'Leelathilakam' composed in the 14<sup>th</sup> c. CE also compares the Sanskrit inflected Manipravala and the Tamil inflected 'pattu'.



There are portions of the ‘Adhyatmaramayana’ where Ezhuthachan praised various deities. These panegyrics are major portions of his works. For these portions he used Sanskrit. Most of these panegyrics are in praise of Rama and Krishna. Ezhuthachan religiously sticks to Sanskrit alone in these portions of his works. Thus in the ‘Adhyatmaramayana’ Ezhuthachan praises Sugreeva and Jatayu in sections named ‘Praise of Sugreeva’ and ‘Praise of Jatayu.’ Though Sugreeva and Jatayu are not venerated deities, these sections are also in Sanskrit. In the section titled ‘praise of the severed heads’ also Sanskrit alone is employed.

Either pure Sanskrit or highly intricate mixture of erudite Sanskrit and Malayalam (manipravalam) is his preference while praising favoured deities. This order of language in ‘Adhyatma Ramayana’ is followed in ‘Bharatam Kilippattu’ also. In the beginning of the ‘Shalyaparva’ of the Malayalam translation of the Mahabharatha, there is a hymnal invocation of Lord Krishna. This section is in Sanskrit. There is a prayer by Yudhishtira is the beginning of the culminating ‘Shantiparva.’ This section has also been composed in Sanskrit.

It is interesting to note that Ezhuthachan was translating an original Sanskrit work called ‘Adhyatmaramayana’ in Sanskrit. Ezhuthachan was well versed in both Sanskrit and Malayalam and it was not for lack of Sanskrit prowess that he desisted from rendering sacred portions of the original in Sanskrit itself.

It was a strategic decision on the part of the transcreator. It became easier for the common Malayalam reader to read the original Sanskrit sections now transmitted into Malayalam by Ezhuthachan. It was also easier on the ear to listen to the original Sanskrit of the ‘Adhyatma Ramayana’ rendered again into Sanskrit by Ezhuthachan.

There is a famous description of the beauty of Sri Krishna that begins with ‘open peacock feathers’ is an exception, where Ezhuthachan did take creative liberties with the original Sanskrit while translating the eloquent passage into Malayalam. The Bhakti poet had to make a choice between the original Sanskrit and the local ‘Bhasha.’ It was a bold decision to use Malayalam. Again, it was not a choice that was rhetorically championed by the bhakti poets. Rather they were often snide and sarcastic and apologetic about it. They were also confident that in the local tongue they won’t be hounded by Grammarians and linguistic-police for lack of vedic and linguistic scholarship.

Sanskrit is given prominence in sections where erotic sentiment is dominant. But there is a lengthy section solely composed in pure Sanskrit in the ‘Bharatam Kilippattu.’ It is the section where Kunti directs her sons returning from the Draupadi Swayamvara, to split their spoils. It is a section of extreme significance in the poem. It can be doubted that Ezhuthachan used Sanskrit to cover up the illogicality of the episode by adopting a faux seriousness. One of Ezhuthachan’s specialities is that of making the situation energetic by using verse or cumulative descents in rhyme. In couplets and in lengthy metaphors, he has succeeded in using this craft. For the Malayalam reading-public ‘the Sanskrit transliteration given to the original Sanskrit of Vyasa by a Keralite scholar is enjoyable.’ (Nair, CCK 313)

For Ezhuthachan, what matters is the greatness of the original source material and its divine protagonist. So it can be related only in the divine language-Sanskrit, and not in Malayalam. He is especially crafty in the use of metaphors and rhymes that combine at the level of punning Sanskrit logos with Malayalam rhythms. These sections of his works are heavy with the effects induced by consonance. While sharing its core ideology and its focus on devotion to a personal god, with the pan-Indian Bhakti in general and Southern Bhakti in particular, Kerala Bhakti also had salient features of its own, that made it unique, which made it resist anthologization in the medieval era and also in the present.

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## CHAPTER 5 : BHAKTI AND THE PARALLAX

The predicament vis-à-vis medieval Bhakti poetry of Kerala starts with its categorization as Southern, which invariably means Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Kerala.<sup>1</sup> Due to the Malayalam language, Kerala maintains its linguistic and cultural specificity relative to its Southern neighbours viz. Karnataka and Tamil Nadu, following the post-independence linguistic reorganization of states. The Medieval picture was more fluid. The Bhakti poetry of Kerala was more aligned with its Northern counterpart rather than with the neighboring powerhouses of Tamil and Kannada languages.<sup>2</sup> Medieval Bhakti seemed to have moved from Tamil country to the North, before being assimilated into Malayalam, in a curious tripartite movement. It was not an imperial expansion of Bhakti, since Kerala maintained its political, cultural and social specificity.<sup>3</sup> It was part of a spiritual cartography of a larger India. Thus Kerala Bhakti poets like Cherusseri could imagine the Govardhana mountain, or the Kalindi based on textual narratives. ‘Mid-way froze the fast-flowing Kalindi river, its waves/subsiding under the waves of music. The fish/left their abode in water, followed the trail’ (Namboodiri, Cherusseri). So where did Southern India begin?<sup>4</sup>

Žižek seems to have an answer. He raised the question ‘where did Balkans begin?’ For the Balkan Serbs, they themselves were the protectors of European Christendom against barbaric Muslim invasions. For Croatia, the Serbs are the Balkan Orthodox fanatics. For the Slovenes, Slovenia is the farthest outpost of peaceful and civilized Europe. For the people of Italy and Austria, the Slovenes are Slavs and hence non-European others. Germans consider Austria to be Asiatic. Some French people consider Germany to be the barbaric other of European civilization. When it comes to England, they treat the entire continental Europe together with the European

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<sup>1</sup> It is interesting to note that AK. Ramanujan, who early in his career was a college lecturer in Kollam in Kerala, has never written about Kerala or its Bhakti traditions or poetry. He just mentions in passing the ‘Soviet-inspired’ communism in Kerala and the interesting names people there had owing to this and its historical trajectory and thus lessons for the present day.

<sup>2</sup> The metaphor of Bhakti being akin to a girl who grew up in Tamil country, moved to the West and got fragmented and then reached maturity in the North bears an uncanny similarity with the fate of ‘Hayavadana’. The tale was borrowed by Thomas Mann from Sanskrit in his ‘Transposed Heads’. It was then adapted from the German by Girish Karnad in his play *Hayavadana*. In a similar elliptical trajectory, Kerala Bhakti also seems to have moved.

<sup>3</sup> The matrilineal system, for example is alien to Tamil Nadu, but for regions lying adjacent to Kerala.

<sup>4</sup> The geographical division of regions as North and South, though not in conflict always, and the itinerant nature of many sages from Sankara onwards created a network of Bhakti public sphere that were not undifferentiated, and which added colour to the cartography of Bhakti.

Union as the new Ottoman Empire. ‘Brussels is the new Constantinople’ (Žižek, *The Spectre of the Balkan*) is its battle-cry. Greece comes further east of Serbia and it curiously is not in this picture, but makes a perfect comeback as the very birthplace of Western Civilization.

Žižek is here using the idea of Balkanization as some kind of an alibi. A similar movement (spatially possible, though temporally scattered over many centuries) can be seen at work in medieval India where, though not in a pejorative sense, to the south of Kashmir Saivism, was the Vrindavan and Gangetic plain with their Vaishnava Bhakti and Braj literatures, to further south were the nirgun poet Kabir and then the Varkaris. Further down the country were the Virashaiva poets of Kannada. The Alwars and Nayanars of Tamil brought up the rear. Kerala was nowhere in the picture, but with Sankara, the region was thrown back into the heart of the devotional cartography just as Greece was in Žižek’s analogy of progressive alibis of Balkanization in Europe. Through these membranes of infinitesimal difference, the devotional spirit of Bhakti percolated in the medieval Indian body-politic. Bhakti simply was a mode of transmission in a network, like carrier waves, without any specific content or social agenda. It had a voracity<sup>5</sup> and fertility that ensured that it acquired far more followers than any other literary movement in India. Like asceticism, it also did not cultivate an otherworldliness. Unlike the hermit, the Bhakti poet was very much a man/woman of the world, though they might have left the pleasures of palace life or caste superiority. (See Olivelle)

Žižek says that the hysteric (like the Bhakti mystic) fantasizes for himself a spectral anatomy, on to which are projected various traumas (just like Europe’s contradictions were projected onto the Balkans). The Bhakti poets were contemplating and using this spectral anatomy (or a devotional cartography). ‘Like the face of Lady East/ like the mirror of Lady Night/like the golden earring of the goddess of love/like the ceremonial seat of the god of love/like the white parasol held up/ to welcome the advent of the god of love/rose the moon in slow motion.’ (Namboodiri, Punam, 177) Here Punam Namboodiri is using the instance of Ravan visiting the abducted Sita, after having told the moon to shine when he does so. Punam, interestingly is careful to get his coordinate bearings for moonrise right. To the east were the Vaishnava poets of love and amour (further to the south was Lanka itself). (For Žižek, ‘the most radical moment of love is not the

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<sup>5</sup> Bhakti was in a sense an undesiring desire. The ascetic principle was to renounce, in order to return to the centre. Just as the ascetic tradition was not a renunciatory one, the Bhakti tradition was also not giving up on its desire.

belief of others which sustains the subject in its ex-sistence, but the subject's own counter-gesture, the terrifyingly daring act of fully accepting that my very existence depends on others, that I am nothing but a figure in the dreamspace of an inconsistent other'. (Žižek, *Agitating the Frame*, 59)) There was a qualitative gradation of bhakti devotion along the geographical contours of India.

Ezhuthachan also performs a feat of heavy duty compression when he squeezes the entire 'Bhagavad Gita' into the two lines : 'And then the Lord revealed/ The supreme spiritual truth to partha,' (Ezhuthachan, *Mahabharatham*, 227) in his 'Mahabharatham Kilippattu'. The perplexed reader finds this fine line sandwiched between an Arjuna, crestfallen at the sight of his elders and teacher and an Arjuna, who is combat ready prostrating before his Lord and charioteer. The reason for the elision of these lines beginning with 'Dharmakshetre Kurukshetre', is some what mysterious to say the least. <sup>6</sup> The task of transmitting the entire 125,000 verses of the epic Mahabharatha in 'anushtuppu' metre into 25,000 verses must have made such elisions imperative. Ezhuthachan's 'Mahabharatham Kilippattu', is lighter<sup>7</sup> in comparison. Ezhuthachan was thus a veritable Atlas holding aloft the edifice of Indian Bhakti. Žižek says that 'if we want to witness the breakdown of the barrier of real/reality-we have only to follow paintings of 1960s by Mark Rothko'. (Žižek, *Looking Awry*, 14). In Rothko paintings there is a primordial Real at the centre, not engulfing yet might overflow the field of reality. This exactly is the status of the paramatma in conjunction with the jeevatma or individual self in the bhakti of Ezhuthachan who follows from the Bhagavad Gita's invocation 'Bhava Madbhakto', the idea of Bhakti. 'The Real is the fullness of the inert presence, positivity, nothing is lacking in the Real-that is, the lack is introduced only by the symbolization; it is a signifier which introduces a void, an absence in the Real'. (Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 170)



(Rothko, Mark. *Untitled (Black on Grey)*. 1970.)

<sup>6</sup>The progressive fringe in Kerala, like C.Ravichandran have argued that this is due to Ezhuthachan's aversion to the caste edifice. But this claim seems specious in the light of the 'Adhyatma Ramayana' where the poet is not averse to paying encomiums to the Brahmins.

<sup>7</sup>P.Govinda Pillai calls it his more mature work.

### **Žižekian parallax: critique of pure bhakti**

The hypothetical (perceived or real) Aryan-Dravidian divide has been hotly contested and might have existed only in the missionary Robert Caldwell's imagination and yet this world picture is so significant for the medieval thought process as the following instances would show. Spurious race theories abound. But the 'n' and other 'chillu' (special consonant letters that do not comprise an inherent vowel) letters of Malayalam constitute the Dravidian parallax vis-a-vis Sanskrit. Nripanandana becomes 'Nripanandan' in Ezhuthachan's transcreation. (Ezhuthachan, Adhyatmaramayanam, p 136). Rama is rendered as Raman.

According to Žižek, who owes the concept of Parallax to Kojin Karatani's 'Transcritique', one of the instances of parallax is the gap between the Anglo-Saxon term 'pig' used by peasantry and its more elite Norman counterpart 'pork' (from porque). This is the parallax between the 'rustic' producer and the 'sophisticated' consumer. Ezhuthachan and other Bhakti poets like Melpathur Namboodiri were prosumers in this sense. They were producers as well as consumers of the devotionalism of Bhakti. In their act of consumption of Sanskrit sources, they were producing vernacular Bhakti. The linguistic heritage of Manipravalam served as a ready source of Sanskritic usage, even while providing a format and structure of its own, in the native metres of kakali and keka.

There were other areas such as Kerala, where Sanskrit did not have any visible tensions with Sanskrit. The growth of mani-pravala a hybrid literary language, consisting of Sanskrit words and the indigenous Malayalam, is a fine example of the response of the literary community of Kerala to Sanskrit. Despite several instances of resistance to Sanskrit by the bhasha communities, sometimes strong and strident, they could never eliminate its hegemony. (Das, A History, 7)

There was a tussle between the great and little traditions. The parallax between the local tongue, or Bhasha and Sanskrit, gave rise to the prolific ruby and coral verse called Manipravalam. This can be studied linguistically, following an evolutionary history of Malayalam, as Rich Freeman does. Freeman says that the claim regarding Manipravalam being a combination of Sanskrit and Malayalam 'can only be construed as a motivated attempt to monopolize the label Manipravalam for its own Kerala-based production.' (Freeman, 59)



There is in Ezhuthachan's poetry a merging of the sthavara and the jangama,<sup>8</sup>the eternally immobile stable ideal and the fluid, changing Real (the inert and the mobile). The eternally uncompromising corpus of the land was moulded with the sorrows and pities of the human body. P.Govinda Pillai, VC. Sreejan, MM. Basheer, MK. Sanu among others have studied this from unconventional stand points, including a Hegelian Marxist point of view. The episode of the 'Ahalya moksham' where Ahalya is reprieved from a lapidary existence by the touch of Lord Rama's feet, is a moment of pure jouissance in the epic.

And you are empty too, less than zero, empty, and still

River Ganga, chastened by the dust of your lotus feet

Purify Shiva, the wearer of the serpents, and Brahma and others

By your sweet influence

And now I too have been touched by your feet! (Ezhuthachan, in Paniker ed, 198)

A major influence, albeit a philosophical one, on Kerala Bhakti was that of Sri Shankaracharya, who came from Kalady in Kerala. Shankaracharya foregrounded jnanayoga above karmayoga. Žižek also has (in)famously posited this in his exhortation, 'don't act, just think.' Sankara, a sworn enemy of Buddhists, upheld the varnashrama dharma which had been denounced by Buddha. Like Buddha and Mahavira, Sankara too was against animal sacrifice in rituals. He opposed upholding jnanayoga over karmayoga. Sankara's verbal duels and victories against Kumarila Bhatta, Prabhakara Bhatta (both advocates of vedic sacrificial rituals) and Mandana Mishra were the stuff of legend. 'Sankara's triumphant tour of India and as the legends say, his ascendancy to the sarvajnapeetha (the pedestal of omniscience) were foregone conclusions.' (Pillai G., 10) The pan-Indian cartography of medieval Malayalam Bhakti starts with the ascent of Sankara's star.

### **Is parallax a substitute for dialectic?**

The Perumal dynasty that ruled Kerala vanishes from textual history, circa early 9<sup>th</sup> c. CE, leaving no traces. Kulasekhara Alvar who ruled Kerala in the 8<sup>th</sup> c. CE composed in Sanskrit and Tamil, though he often appears as a Keralite in hagiographies compiled in the present-day. Then

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<sup>8</sup>These principles were apparently significant for Basavanna too. The Sthavaras are unlimited in number whereas jangamas are limited, such as human beings.

begins the Dravidian period, that evolved in conjunction with and sometimes at odds with Sanskrit. According to Chelanat Achyutha Menon, there must be presumed to have been a gradual linguistic continuum from Sanskrit to the Dravidian language, since 'arbitrary divisions in literary history are often misleading. Literary influences take time to establish themselves and they disappear also gradually at the same time leaving some permanent traces of their contact'. (Menon, C.A. 15)

The parallax emerges between two apparently mutually contradictory positions-Sanskrit and Old Malayalam. But they are not antagonistic. One is not the enemy of the other. This gap is not one that is supposed to be filled, rather it is constitutive. (in one of Žižek's rather vulgar unpublished jokes, a woman in a spirit of ecstasy shows Christ her intimate 'wound' and he heals her. ) The gap provides a map, or indication of how the social animus is constituted, rather like Lévi Strauss' demonstration of the different maps of the Indian village produced by different strata of the same village. There is no real antagonism. If we could perceive the real antagonist, perhaps we could fight it. But that is not the case here.

According to Žižek, there is an irreducible asymmetry between the two perspectives, there is minimal torque or reflexive twist between the two. The parallax is thus not symmetrical, composed of two incompatible perspectives on the same X like the wings of a butterfly. Sanskrit was not the enemy of Malayalam nor was the Dravidian language Sanskrit's 'other.' We don't have two perspectives, but one perspective and what it misses or eludes. Not only is the gaze transformed in the parallax, but the object receiving the gaze itself is transformed. The ontological parallax is that between reality and the reality into which the self has been inserted. The scientific parallax is the inability to pinpoint both location and velocity simultaneously, a la Heisenberg- the gap between reality and experience of reality. The political parallax is that of social antagonisms where the infinite series of subversions merely feed the system. Ezhuthachan and other bhakti poets like Cherusseri, Poonthanam and Melpathur who marked the later stages of the emergence of Malayalam from Sanskrit, were performing a feat of slesa or bitextuality. In the context of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, Yigal Bronner says that 'slesa is most spectacular in a genre of long poems that simultaneously narrate the two great Indian epics' (Bronner, 91). Being able to be comprehended in two linguistic traditions was nothing short of a feat. This was the medieval bhakti parallax in Malayalam.

## Instances of the parallax

The idea of the parallax is supposed to convey the gap within the object itself whereby it fails to coincide with itself. That is why Žižek uses the rather lowly allusion of i) micturation and insemination which are two essential processes that are separated by the very same parallax. He also says elsewhere that ii) it is perfectly normal for a person to swallow his/her own saliva, but once it is spit out into an external container, it becomes impossible for most people to imbibe it again. The same can be applied to iii) the gap that exists between the mass of flesh and blood vessels that comprise the brain and the actual functions of the brain. He also uses this concept to illustrate the iv) editorial fate of F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel *Tender is the Night*. Even after the author made a much called for rearrangement of events in the narrative, the fate of the novel did not improve for the better. The two different versions of the same novel are separated by the parallax. Žižek calls this the minimal difference. This is the 'je ne sais quoi' mysterious element or the objet petit a, which is the driver of desire.<sup>9</sup> How can the body, subject as it is to ailments and prone to ablutionary activities be the centre of desire, libido and lust? It is the excess, what is in someone more than himself/herself. That is the Kantian noumena.

In the transubstantiation by Bhakti of the ordinary everyday like love, piety, pity, suffering, rage, angst, frustration, pangs of separation, concupiscence etc. into something exalted and extraordinary the parallax introduced by an 'objet petit a' is in operation. Bhakti is subjective so much so that with the movement of the subject, the shape of its Bhakti changes as well, thus engendering networks of bhakti and its sociality, encompassing multiple perspectives and points of view just as 'Poonthanam's intense devotion for Krishna made him a follower of Ezhuthachan (Pillai, G. 246)'. The 'objet petit a' which gives rise to the parallax, cannot be pinpointed or symbolically grasped. Thus the parallax is not between bhakti and vibhakti (two different entities that positively exist), but between an object and itself. It is between the bhakti (of Ezhuthachan) and the bhakti (of Poonthanam). For Ezhuthachan, the deity Narayana is a multiverse, since 'Great is the difference between me and Rama/20 hands have I to embrace you/and 10 faces to kiss your charming face/he has just one face and a pair of hands/my salutations to Lord

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<sup>9</sup> Bhakti in this sense is not desire averse, despite Ezhuthachan's verses like, 'like a toad about to be swallowed by a snake, humanity/in the grasp of time, seeks momentary pleasures.' The enunciation is different from the statement, as Jacques Lacan would say. The Bhakti movement in the very process of non-desire was creating a new language of desiring, Malayalam.

Narayana!’ (Ezhuthachan, 24 Cantos, 258). As for Poonthanam Namboodiri, Lord Shiva is a guide, since ‘Lost in a wild jungle, O Lord,/I grope to find my way/Lead me along the righteous path/O Lord Shiva of the holy shrine of Vaikom’ (Namboodiri, Poonthanam. Naranayingane, 265). Here there is in operation a minimal torsion between the two perspectives, ‘a minimal difference. a ‘pure’ difference which cannot be grounded in positive substantial properties.’ (Žižek, *The Parallax View*, 18)

Žižek in order to illustrate this, uses Henry James’ work, ‘The Real Thing’,<sup>10</sup> where an artist hires a patrician couple to model for a portrait of two aristocrats, but the real effect eludes him so that he is compelled to hire a ‘cockney’ duo to fulfil the task. The lesson Žižek draws from this is that the real aristocrats are not real aristocrats themselves, since there is a minimal difference separating them from themselves. There is no authenticity, just as everything, including belief, is hollow at its core. Blaise Pascal’s concept is that if one cannot bring oneself to believe in God, then it is alright to fake belief so that one may in doing so come to believe. This according to Žižek<sup>11</sup> is the desperate hope of ideological ritual. Bhakti in this context becomes a linguistic ritual. The bhakti recites/performs his/her devotions and is made a bhakti in the very performative act of devotion.

Pascal’s Christian ideal<sup>12</sup> is to leave ‘argumentation.’ Bhakti is also an act of submission<sup>13</sup> and ideological conversion. LD Barnett calls bhakti ‘Godward love in utter self-surrender.’ (Barnett, 43). Ideology here was often closer in sense to the Althusserian ideology with its Ideological State Apparatuses, rather than the fantasy inflected ideology of Žižek. For Tamil historian R.Champakalakshmi ‘there is a return to pan-Indian forms of ideological claims, seen in conscious efforts by the early Vijayanagara rulers to revive Vedic studies by grants to Sringeri and to commentaries viz. ‘Vedabhasya’ of Sayanacharya’ (Champakalakshmi, *Religion, Tradition and Ideology*, 637). Bhakti is a tradition and not yet a ‘custom.’

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<sup>10</sup>Since Bhakti poetry is unfamiliar to Žižek (we have to make bhakti familiar to him).

<sup>11</sup>Žižek is not a rationalist in the naive sense. He claims to understand the structure of belief and calls himself a Christian atheist.

<sup>12</sup>Colonial administrators and scholars of comparative religion like Abraham Grierson tried to recast bhakti as an Indian version of monotheism with a single Godhead. (Grierson, George Abraham 1909. *Gleanings from the Bhakta-Mala*. *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*).

<sup>13</sup> Though not in the Islamic Sufi sense. Islam advocates submission. The very term ‘Islam’ means submission.

In hindsight, Bhakti was also a movement or a network. Scholars like Stratton Hawley would claim that Bhakti was not a movement, but rather, a ‘network.’ Hawley, in his *A Storm of Songs*, calls Bhakti a ‘commonwealth of love’. Bhakti thus becomes ‘belief before belief’ in the Pascalian sense. The status of belief in Bhakti and in general is precarious. It is this tightrope walk of belief over the trembling abyss of unbelief that imparts the quality of poignancy to much of the works of Ezhuthachan, Poonthanam and Cherusseri, though the idiom of their articulation of this ‘downtrodden’ precariousness differs from instance to instance. The ‘Adhyatma Ramayanam’ of Thunchathu Ezhuthachan is distinct in its tone of spirituality from his ‘Bharatham Kilippattu’ and other works more devotional in nature. They could be compared to the plays and sonnets of Shakespeare,<sup>14</sup> which in itself constitutes an inherent parallax gap, one that opens up between scripture and literature. What was recognised as scripture at one point came to be identified as literature at another. This divergence encapsulates within itself the tension within belief and unbelief that was incorporated into Bhakti, in its sagun and nirgun versions, that in its non-dualist worldview would be far from the post-modern debates on rationality and belief.

But there emerges a crucial gap between the so-called ‘Pascalian wager’ on belief and the practice of Bhakti devotion or Bhakti praxis that brings Bhakti closer to the Žižekian parallax. The Pascalian wager posits that if one is in doubt over the existence of deity, it is always better to believe anyway since the possibility of an eventual non-existence of deity cannot hurt you. But Bhakti subverts this not by radically positing the non-existence of a deity, but rather through the assertion of the existence of a multitude of deities, so that non-belief segues into the realm of belief in the density of gods/deities. In this density of gods did the humanism of Bhakti prosper. This provides a relief from the inertia of conventional feudal-patriarchal religion with its leaden core of ritual and scripture. This ritual and scriptural core of vedic faith was circumvented by Bhakti through deploying secret scriptures and oral narratives as well as a non-ritualistic ideology. The literary corpus of Bhakti was the secret and yet not-so-secret scripture of medieval India. ‘Dadu<sup>15</sup> conceives of his God in the image of the ruling king, at the social level he sharply attacks the orthodoxy of conservatives within Hindus and Muslims’ (Mukhia, 62).

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<sup>14</sup>There is a parallax operating between the Bard’s sonnets and plays. Competing claims as to their authorship can be laid to rest by employing the parallax.

<sup>15</sup>Dadu Dayal was a Gujarati Bhakti saint from the 16<sup>th</sup> c. CE.

Bhakti's infinite acceptance of deities and its essentially polytheistic nature means that one already is in Bhakti, so to speak, before consciously realizing it. It is not an act of appropriation, but rather a progression of consciousness in the Hegelian sense. In this context, Bhakti becomes the world-conquering spirit albeit confined within the limits of the sacred geography of India. In the intensity of its devotion, Bhakti creates an appeal to renunciation which in turn produces its jouissance of enjoyment, the mystical jouissance of the ascetic, which is a core component of Bhakti. It is not a repressed libido, but an effulgence of the spirit that finds its fullness in communion with the deity, who manifested, or gave darsan, in the literature of Bhakti. The literary manifestation of asceticism was Bhakti poetry. Thus the repressed emerges in Bhakti poetry. Bhakti was the outpouring of what remained repressed within the subaltern collective consciousness of medieval India. The symbolism of Bhakti is crucial in a Jungian sense. Bhakti itself is the traumatic kernel of the failed symbolization with no substantial materiality to itself. It is in this very failure and act of submission that Bhakti asserts itself. It took flight in the medieval darkness like the owl of Minerva. This constitutes the paradoxical trope of the world renouncing ascetic in traditional Indian culture who returns to wield much power before potentates, which in turn has been earned through this very act of renunciation. This is the same trope found in the biblical story of the prodigal son, articulated from within a very different philosophical milieu.

Bhakti is not empty talk or vain preaching or a compendium of moral values and literary tracts. It would be too naive and simplistic to confine Bhakti within the confines of pure devotion to the deity. Ezhuthachan and Cherusseri have even included erotic passages in their works. So, in short, Bhakti is not something that is easy to define. It is a complex, multivalent phenomenon. It could even be called an 'ideology' that spiritually filled, or attempted to fill, a certain material vacuum that arose out of historical contingencies in medieval India.

Žižek calls the Ideological State Apparatuses (ISA) the Pascalian machine. This is the interpellating machine that 'generates consent' so to speak. But this attempted 'internalization' of the brutal machine that grinded down upon the lives of the peasantry and such others during medieval times, failed to be complete. There was a left-over remainder in the Real. The ruling ideology was not completely assimilated or digested, although its power was widely accepted and acknowledged. This process of 'internalization' failed, and in its wake it left a traumatic left over kernel. It was this left over kernel which articulated itself in Bhakti. The vacuum or

hollowness that could not be assimilated by the powers that be, became the voice of the voiceless. This could also be read as an expulsion from the traditional caste hierarchy. Thus Bhakti circumvents the ISAs or sometimes acts through these structures despite the presence of ISAs. It is the very symptom that raises itself in defiance against the omnipotence of the prevailing discourse. Using the Hollywood blockbuster, *Forrest Gump*, Žižek illustrates that ‘pure ideology is presented as non-ideology since the slow-witted hero good-naturedly participates in social life’ (Žižek, *The Invisible Remainder*, 200).

The caste consciousness in the ‘Ramayana’ can be illustrated by the instance of ‘Sabari’ who was a hunter, and looked down upon for her profession, although as a mountain dweller, the Kurinci Tinai in Sangam poetry accords space for her. The story of Sabari in the Ramayana, is as follows: The sons of Dasaratha proceeded in the westward direction prescribed by Kabandha. Thus they reached the Asrama of Sabari surrounded by beautiful trees towards the west of Pamba<sup>16</sup> in Kerala. That learned sage, upon seeing Rama along with his younger brother, got up and prostrated. Appropriately welcomed, Rama asked Sabari, the yogini: “when one starts to meditate, many obstacles are to be faced. You have overcome all of them. Has not your feat of meditation improved?” Sabari replied. “God! I have today received the reward for my austerities. Lord! Upon seeing thee my propitiation of my Guru has been fulfilled. My life has been fulfilled. Great Lord! The day your feet touched Chithrakooda, the great sages whom I was serving boarded on a marvellous flight to heaven. Those masters of Dharma told me that Rama, along with the son of Sumitra shall reach here. Worship them appropriately. Therefore, my Lord! to pay obeisance before thee, I have collected tasty fruits of excellent trees growing on the banks of the Pamba.” Hearing these sincere words of Sabari, Rama smiled and replied: “I have learned from Manu<sup>17</sup>, many things about the great sages who were under thy care. If you agree I would like to visit all those holy places.” Hearing Rama’s words, Sabari showed that great forest to the sons of Dasaratha. Then she said: “God! Bid me farewell. Which great sages were residing in this holy hermitage, who received my care, let me follow in their footsteps.” Thus with Rama’s permission, that deerskin-clad old female monk, went to the eternal world.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>On the banks of the Pamba river is where Ayyappan or Hariharasuthan, the progeny of Vishnu and Shiva, the immensely popular folk deity of Southern India resides.

<sup>17</sup>The Manusmriti is a text that Žižek calls ‘horrible’, for ideological reasons.

<sup>18</sup>The rise of Mata Amridananda Mayi, the ‘hugging saint’ from a coastal village and community, is the closest analogue to Sabari that comes to mind, showing that Ezhuthachan was not writing in a vacuum, and there has been a spiritual continuum.

The story of Sabari as mentioned in the popular version of the Valmiki Ramayana ends at this juncture. But when this story reaches the 'Adhyatma Ramayana,' it undergoes a drastic change in its core element. The elderly female monk becomes a lowly born frail old woman well-versed in Bhakti.

Thus Žižek's wishful aphorism, 'wouldn't it be wonderful if Communism were really true?' can be paraphrased as 'Wouldn't it be wonderful if Bhakti were really true?' since Bhakti has no substantial material core. It was not a tangible material or spiritual reality that could be accessed outside of an already existing and developing literary core. It was a wish fulfilment that came true in the literary sphere of production. Yet it is not the jack in the box a la objet petit a. It was consequential, serious and impersonal at some level. And the gap that is defined by Bhakti, is constitutive of the medieval literary sphere of Kerala.

This gap, or absence which is constitutive, draws an analogy parallel to the idea borrowed from quantum mechanics, which Žižek often employs, regarding the incompleteness of physical reality. Žižek posits it as akin to a high quality video game wherein the innermost details are sometimes blank since the game programmers did not think that anyone would be interested in such minute details and hence left them unprogrammed. Žižek thus says that the deity left the subatomic space of quantum physics in the void of uncertainty, not expecting humans to get inside the fundamental particle. This raises the question 'who was the programmer?', since Žižek's worldview is avowedly atheist. This is the core nature of the belief in Bhakti poetry since it stands for an emptiness that calls for a creator who could also be, to use a non-predicate in Žižekian fashion, 'unexistent.' Thus it is not that the deity does not exist, but rather that the deity itself is rendered unexistent by multiplicity. It is the logic of emptiness (zero) rather than that of uniqueness (one) that is employed in Bhakti. It is not a lonely singularity of a single God that turns into bitter vinegar over time, but rather a profusion of 'Godhood' in great density that Bhakti stands for.

The correspondence between Žižek's oeuvre and Bhakti literature would lie in a certain counter-intuitive nonchalance.

#### The sublime object of Bhakti:

According to Žižek, 'nothing is lacking in the Real.' (Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 172) The perceived lack in the Real per se is introduced by the symbolization process. The Real could thus also be conceived of as the point of short circuiting wherein absolute polarities



collapse into each other. This act of repudiation of differences is akin to a short circuiting. The man-woman, human-god, native-foreigner, adult-child, master-slave, believer-non believer, beautiful-ugly, benign-evil, violent-peaceful, abject-powerful dichotomies erase each other in an act of coincidence. This is what comprises the definitive 'mystical' quality in mysticism, within a milieu that was dominantly non-dualistic.

The Real in this sense cannot be inscribed. It is not the Kantian noumena or the thing-in-itself. Rather, in itself the Lacanian Real is nothing at all. It can hence never be inscribed. The Real is elusive. The core of Bhakti can never be articulated. Hence its longevity, despite many hostile incursions, both literary and non-literary, ranging from colonial modernity to post-modernism and finance capital. Whether Bhakti is a movement, a narrative, a network or a post-facto construction is beside the point. It is elusive. Žižek describes this with the ancient Greek paradox posited by Zeno of Achilles and the tortoise.

Achilles the hero can easily outstrip the tortoise and overtake it. But to reach exactly the same co-ordinates as the tortoise would be impossible, since by then the tortoise must be infinitesimally ahead. This also applies to the pursuit of pleasure. Pleasure or jouissance is always elusive, in a way the Bhakti poets would have preferred. It can never be absolutely attained. There is no perfect coincidence with pleasure. By that point the object of pleasure would have moved ahead, thus remaining elusive. Pleasure always eludes one's grasp.

The Real also cannot be articulated in this manner and will always remain elusive. The pursuit of the Real is the drive in its purest, often ending in psychosis. In this way mystics like Chaitanya have been called 'mad-elephant' ('mada matta hathi') as Sisir Kumar Das puts it. Ezhuthachan was also often called a 'Kallukudiyar' or drunkard. The discourse of the mystic is the articulation of this 'Real,' or the kernel that resists the sublimation of the 'Real,' in a Lacanian sense.

Sreeramayana that runs into a hundred crores  
Of books, the one Brahma composed, is not here on earth.  
The savage chanting Rama's name turned into a sage,  
And Brahma observing this commanded him to write  
Ramayana for deliverance of all beings on earth.  
Narada's counsel Valmiki had and the goddess

Of the word dwelt forever on his tongue.  
Dwell so on my tongue too: this I long to say  
But am too shy so to pray. (Ezhuthachan, Adhyathma Ramayana, 4)

The idea of madness in Bhakti and mysticism in general is the drive in its purest. Graphically it would be a lamella. The pure disembodied grin of the Cheshire cat in Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* is how Žižek would describe it. The pursuit of Bhakti is its own object. It has no content. It is devoid of desire. Bhakti itself becomes the deity in this context. Like Wilfred Cantwell Smith's stance on religion, Bhakti could well be a post-facto construction. Lord Krishna says 'Bhava Madbhakto' in the 'Bhagavad Gita' but this could not have been intended in the modern literary sense of the term 'Bhakti', as it is used today in academic circles. The elusiveness of the Bhakti ontology, due to its constitutive emptiness has imparted the romantic 'mystic' quality to Bhakti whereby it has been deemed a 'pursuit of the beloved,' the beloved being the deity. The 'Geetgovinda' and Cherusseri's 'Krishnagadha' were proto-works of this type. Romance of Heer-Ranjha, Sohni-Mahiwal etc, gave flesh to the immaterial and intangible Bhakti. In the present day and age, this has acquired various mediatised performative parameters and hues as Linda Hess has brought forth in her 'Bodies of Song.'

The idea that the pursuit of enjoyment is an elusive one was not unique to Bhakti. The Buddhist tradition has also fostered a similar spirit. The parallax between the Buddhist faith and Bhakti as a movement is interesting in this sense. Bhakti was the embodiment of renunciation. While Buddhism tarried with the unreal, Bhakti was rooted in the Real. Particularly in the context of Kerala, Buddhist influence was meagre or according to some accounts systematically effaced from early on. There are various legends that the Buddha is the prototype of many major deities of Kerala. The parallax need not be symmetric. There is always an irreducible asymmetry between the two. In the case of Bhakti and Buddhism in Kerala, this asymmetry is very much visible in hindsight, with Bhakti proving to be a lasting major influence in the literary and social landscape.

Bhakti could reach a far more universal status in Kerala. Žižek says that 'concrete universality is not merely the universal core that animates a series of its particular forms of appearance; it persists in the very irreducible tension, non-coincidence between these different levels.' (Žižek, *The Parallax View*, 31)

Here, the tension between the emancipator discourses of Buddhism and Bhakti were imbued within the stream of the Bhakti poetry. Much of this is owing to the crafty use of linguistic dexterity and manoeuvring between the idioms of Malayalam, Tamil and Sanskrit mythology.

The spread of Bhakti owes much to the linguistic genius of Ezhuthachan, Cherusseri and Poonthanam. Bhakti poetry was able to bring to the fore the parallax gap between the temporal material existence of the body and the eternal atemporal existence of the soul.

What was singularly lacking in Kerala Bhakti was the anti-caste vision of bhakti poets like Tiruppanalvar in the South and Kabir in the North. ‘With Hari’s names I make my song,/May my teacher bless my song!/May gods and Brahmins bless it too!/A human being born on the earth,/may I be blessed to chant His names/all my life and in my last breath too!/O Narayana, I bow unto you.’ (Ezhuthachan, The Hymn of the Lord’s Names)But the universality of Bhakti, self-effacing in its humility, was in the universality of its struggle. This was inherent in Kerala bhakti. ‘Universality is not the neutral container of particular formations, their common measure, the passive (back) ground on which the particulars fight their battles, but this battle itself, the struggle leading from one particular formation to another.’ (Žižek, The Parallax View, 30)The consciousness of Bhakti was not invested in the deity, but in the community of Bhaktas itself. ‘As the bow like a thunder asunder broke/Mithila’s princess Sita, happy like a peahen, grew/Excited, and eaer grew the wise sage too.’ (Ezhuthachan, Adhyatma Ramayana, 201). The simile which compares Sita to a peahen was Ezhuthachan’s addition and did not occur in the Sanskrit original ‘Adhyatma Ramayana’, though it occurs in Kamban.

The universality of the Vedic faith contained the core of Bhakti and Buddhist thought. But they were inflected with respective meanings and hence a tension emerged between these two streams of philosophical thought. While Buddhism focussed on philosophical exegesis, Bhakti was more attuned to music, poetry and dance. The universality of the Vedic religion was enriched or contested by Bhakti, depending on which side of the parallax you are on.

Such was the impact of Bhakti that an entire language called Malayalam arose from the interaction of Sanskrit with proto-Dravidian language. No texts of early Buddhism are available in Malayalam whereas the founding text of Malayalam language, the ‘Adhyatma Ramayanam Kilippattu’ itself is a Bhakti text.

According to Franco Moretti, Marcuse in his work 'One Dimensional Man,' claims that for an unconditioned mind much of public speaking and printing appears surrealistic. The same has been argued by the Prague Circle linguist, Roman Jakobson when he said that the slogan 'I like Ike,' contributed through its internal poetics towards the election of Eisenhower. (Moretti, 234)

### **Parallax Vision:**

Human beings are endowed with stereoscopic vision. We have two eyes which are separate organs with distinct lines of sight thus producing disparate visions. There is no single 'true' perspective. There is a space separating the two eyes which is the parallax.

There occurs a kind of consolidation, or stitching together of two different visions. Sight is a complex operation of manoeuvring between these two lines of sight. The three dimensional impact of human sight is produced due to this stereoscopic vision. The parallax with its multiple points of view is also capable of producing a more comprehensive picture in hindsight.

Humans also are bipeds, possessing two pairs of legs and also two hands. So movement is also a symmetric negotiation between these two limbs.

Similarly the human brain also has two hemispheres separated by a corpus callosum. The left hemisphere controls the right half of the body and the right hemisphere, the left half of the body. This can lead to some interesting thought experiments as demonstrated by VS. Ramachandran that fall not totally outside the ambit of the content as well as spirit of Bhakti.

Despite this non-unilinear, multidimensional design of human body including the brain, 'one-dimensional thinking' as Herbert Marcuse would put it in *One Dimensional Man*, has been inculcated in human beings. In every human relationship or thought process, without us knowing it or not, a degree of reification creeps in. The violence that this does is immense, though corporate thinkers like Edward de Bono have tried to ameliorate this by introducing concepts such as lateral thinking.

Multidimensional thought involves radical plurality and empathy that are beyond conception in our touchy and politically correct times.

This sort of organic plurality and multidimensionality is what TS.Eliot had in mind when he wrote about the ‘dissociation of sensibility’ with reference to the metaphysical poets. Here also one can find a kind of uni-linear thought in operation. Bakhtin also had the same thing in mind vis-a-vis heteroglossia and carnivalism.

The ancient Charvaka philosophers of India embodied the carnivalesque spirit. But, the prime mode of stereophonic thought in Indian literary tradition, is that of Bhakti.

Multidimensionality is not a series of gig lamps, but a luminous halo as Virginia Woolf put in while trying to describe the modernist novel. Stereophonic, heteroglossaic, multidimensional thought has occurred over the ages in different geographical regions, intellectual traditions, literary genres and forms. It has happened in Kerala also as it did in the rest of India.

The proto-Malayalam language called Manipravalam (ruby and coral) was a curious mixture of Sanskrit and local dialect, Sanskrit being the ruby and dialect the coral. This proved to be a prime vehicle for literary imagination in medieval Kerala and acted as a precursor to Malayalam Bhakti poetry of 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries.

Literature in the medieval times was floating in the ether of theological thought in India and elsewhere. Parallax in the Žižekian sense is a divergence in perspective and ‘difference’ of any sort is not synonymous with parallax.

### **Krishna as consciousness:**

Historically speaking, after Tamurlane left after his raids, there emerged a strong current of Vaishnavism all over India (See Orsini and Sheikh). Thus Vaishnavite saints like Chaitanya and Mirabai and Ramanuja emerged. Romantic themes and easy readability sans jargon made the poems of Krishna Bhakti easily accessible. Before Ezhuthachan, there were other Vaishnavite poets like Alvars and Jayadeva and Kannassa poets and Cherusseri himself. Cherusseri is the seminal poet in addressing Kerala Bhakti since he alone deployed the srīngara rasa, which was an earlier version of the later formulated bhakti rasa.

Krishna as deity, is a being among others. There is a parallax between Krishna and others. Cherusseri’s ‘Krishnagadha’ a seminal text of Kerala Bhakti is in relation to Krishna, whereas a more primary text as far as Malayalam literature is concerned, Ezhuthachan’s

‘Adhyatmaramayanam’ pertains to Rama. But no other deity elicits Ezhuthachan’s singular gifts of personalized individual devotion than Lord Krishna. ‘Kindness that extends to us devotees/The anger that turns on wicked men/The tender love that endears to women,/The sense of wonder at the sight of the battle/The smile that mocks the unworthy/the terror that frightens enemies/All these shine in the eyes in their mixed beauty’ (Menon, C.A. 145). Krishna is consciousness itself. ‘The epics form the narrative backbone of South Asian literature’ (Bronner, 246). Thus the consciousness of Krishna was encompassed within the spectrum of the current of bhakti through epic narration as that of the ‘Mahabharata’ by Ezhuthachan and that of ‘Gita Govinda’ by Cherusseri. Thus Cherusseri on Krishna’s flute song says, ‘The raging tiger was quelled by music, and melting/turned maternal, caressing the fawn it had pounced upon’ (Krishnagadha). Bakuls, peepal, black beetles, kayav, champak, fig tree, jasmine, pandanus, antelopes, peacocks, cuckoos, swans, cuckoos, chrysanthemums, njazhal<sup>19</sup>, screw-pine are beseechingly addressed by the pining gopikas who are in search of the infant Krishna. Here, the world is enchanted and imbued with Krishna consciousness.<sup>20</sup> Krishna is deity as being among others. ‘Heidegger’s approach to social life is determined by the dominance of the notion of domestic economy, the ‘closed’ economy of the ‘home’.’ (Žižek, Parallax Gap, 177) This domestic economy is the economy of Bhakti. It might have rendered the private into public, as shows the work of Mirabai, Andal, Akka Mahadevi, Janabai, Habba Khatoon, and others. But Bhakti in Malayalam is conspicuous by its absence of female presence.

### **Gender and Bhakti**

For Žižek the mistake of reading the parallax as one perspective and what eludes it, could be extended to the analysis of gender, with the masculine as the normative phallic and the feminine as what eludes it. But this is a mistake. Woman, rather is unman, unmanning the phallic male. ‘In its very inconsistency and lack of any ultimate point of reference beneath multiple veils, truth is feminine.’ (Žižek, Parallax Gap, 178) Žižek relates this, not by means of Bhakti which was unavailable to him, but the Kurosawa film, ‘Rashomon’, a text of oriental epiphany for western audiences. A woman is raped and her husband is murdered by a robber. All three (the husband as spirit) plus a tree-cutter witness are summoned for evidence. These four then give four different

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<sup>19</sup>A kind of fruit-bearing tree found in Kerala.

<sup>20</sup>‘Krishna consciousness’ is a neologism for ‘Krishna bhakti’ as cited in Goswami, 21.

accounts. The film exposes the reality, as any successful psychoanalytic practice would, that the big Other does not exist. The threat to the big Other<sup>21</sup> comes through the desiring woman. In Ezhuthachan's 'Adhyatma Ramayana' Ahalya, freed from a lapidary fate by Rama's touch praises Rama thus, 'Dwell in my mind, O free soul, the perfect/the blissful, the joyful, of soul the diligent/The one who through the magic of illusion/Wears all forms, and all qualities reflect' (Ezhuthachan, Adhyatma Ramayana). Ahalyamoksham is a moment of pure feminine jouissance in the Kerala Bhakti tradition. The lord dwells within the mind of Ahalya is one with her and is not a separate entity of different gender. This occurs in the Bala Kanda of the 'Adhyatma Ramayana' by Thunchathu Ezhuthachan.

Bhakti in all its asceticism is voraciously desirous and fertile. It is this very fertility that ensured its popularity and following through the ages. According to Advaita, the external perception comes from the mingling of the sense organs with the material world. The internal perception arises through the activity of the mind. (See Matilal) There was the sensual and the ascetic natures inherent in Bhakti. The passive, and otherworldly nature of Bhakti contrasts with its own multi-limbed, armed and assertive style, separated by a parallax. 'Great is the difference between me and Rama/20 hands have I to embrace you/and 10 faces to kiss your charming face.' (Ezhuthachan, 24 Cantos)

There exists the gap between ideal mind and material body, the soul and corpus that finds its way into poetic imagination also. The gap *sookshma* (fine) and *sthoola* (humongous) *sarira* corresponds to the individual and cosmic bodies. Textually, they become the *pada* and the *gadha*-the syllable and the epic. Bhakti could choose to be corporeal too. It was Vivekananda who later propounded the Bhakti Yoga. But this came before that.

There is a gap between reason and feeling, which segues into the man-woman dichotomy later in literature. Bhakti texts of the Kerala tradition are for instance significantly do not take a feminist stance from their medieval points of view, and are yet remarkable for their articulation of a feminine subjective point of view. Ezhuthachan in his 'Adhyatma Ramayana' (verses 141-170) uses the terms 'prabha', 'dandaniti', 'thamasi', 'Bhargavi', 'sadagati', 'sambadkari' not in their

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<sup>21</sup>The big Other could be God, or language, or the chicken in Zizek's joke. A patient thinks he is a grain of rice about to be gobbled up by a chicken. After extensive analysis at the end of which he is convinced that he is not a grain of rice, the patient asks, 'but does the chicken know?' (Zizek, Zizek's Jokes, 67).

popular sense, but as the spouses of surya, yama, niryathi, varuna, vayu, and kubera. (Gopinathapillai, 142) The feminine is foregrounded as subject.

Bhakti is fluid and 'solid' bhakti would be an oxymoron. It has many manifestations, and one is that of the ignoramus or the idiot savant, one of whom was Poonthanam Namboodiri.

### **Bhakti and Vibhakti and the Guru-Shishya parampara**

Poonthanam and Melpathur were contemporaries. Both were Brahmins, Melpatur unlike the more rustic Poonthanam was a Sanskrit Scholar of repute. The scholarship of Melpathur contrasted with the relative naiveté of Poonthanam. Unlike in law, in bhakti, ignorance is virtue.

This comes to fore in the case of Melpathur and Poonthanam where one's simplicity of devotion is very much in contrast with the other's innate classicism. Once while reciting Poonthanam mispronounced 'Padmanabho amaraprabhu' as 'Padmanabho maraprabhu.' Maraprabhu would mean tree-lord in Malayalam and Melpathur heckled the rustic Poonthanam, when a disembodied voice emerged from the sanctum sanatorium of the Guruvayoor Temple which said 'I'm the tree-lord too.'

Poonthanam's 'Jnanappana' is noted for its devotional fervour and simplicity. In this sense he is the poet who comes closest to a conventional pan-Indian idea of bhakti. 'Isn't this the age of Kali?/And isn't this the land of India?/Are we not men?/So we should think!/Are the names of the Lord in short supply?/Are the people now less afraid of hell?/Are we all born without tongues?/Or do we think we are immortal?/Unwittingly we burn away our lives.' (Namboodiri, P)

When Poonthanam approached the scholarly Melpathur to correct his text, Melpathur demurred. As punishment Lord Krishna struck him speechless. He was later unmuted. It was revealed to a repentant Melpathur that 'the bhakti or Poonthanam was dearer to the Lord than the vibhakti of Melpathur.' Vibhakti is a grammatical construct-a link between words in an agglutinative language. It takes a scholarly teacher to make you a good grammarian. But even a naïve teacher too can coach you in bhakti. The gap between the guru and the disciple or the elder and the younger generation, is the parallax of the parampara. According to Chelangat Achyutha Menon, 'a sloka is chanted by the gurumatham sanyasins during their prayers and the names of following Gurus or Acaryas occur: '1.Tuncatthu Sri Guru.2.Sri Karunakaran.3.Sri Suryanarayanan.4.Sri Deva Guru.5.Sri Gopala Guru.' (Menon, C.A. 55)



The sloka, from which this guru shishya genealogy or parampara was obtained went thus: 'Vande...Thunchattezhum Srigurum / Vande...Karunakaranca / Srisuryanarayanam.../ Vande Devagurum.../ Gopalakasrigurum.' (Gurumatham, Pamphlet No.1, p. 8)

It is interesting to note that Mahabharatha is an epic, and thus the prime mode of narrative literature in India, and contains many sub-stories. The 'Bhagavatha Purana' a bhakti text includes the story of Yayati. The moral of the story of Yayati, for George Dumezil, is not a simple extension of life, and reversal of the ageing process for Yayati who would still continue to age relentlessly as per the law of nature, even after the boon which he had received from his son Puru. Rather what King Yayati receives, is 'a new and durable youth, a millennium of youth'. (Dumezil, 22)

Thus Bhakti poetry captures with some nostalgia, the pain that generations feel at the passing of an age. In Bhakti poetry, there also exists a major transition between the layers viz.nirgun and sagun conceptions of deity

You achieve everything; you are everything.  
It was madness of me to think of you as a friend,  
To say, 'Hey, Krishna, Hey Yadava, Hey friend!'  
I did this because I did not know how great you are-  
Or else, perhaps, in carelessness because I love you.  
Sometimes I would tease you when we were joking,  
Either at table or sitting or resting or playing,  
When we were alone, or together with others,  
Forgive me for that you who cannot be measured. (Bhagavad Gita, II.40-42)

There exists a gap between history and fiction, vis-a-vis the historicity of the epics and myths, and the historical veracity of mythical events. 'Thus what was literal at one point of time becomes figurative at another, and vice versa' (White). There also existed a theological parallax in medieval times between Hinduism and Buddhism. This also would be a conceptual difference rather than an empirical one since, philosophically one segues into the other.

There emerges a gap between reading and writing, or orality and written language: Bhakti is considered to be a predominantly oral tradition, and in its 'kilippattu' manifestation clearly

foregrounds the spoken word over the written. One of Ezhuthachan's works is the 'Devi Mahatmyam' which is part of the 'Markandeya Purana.' In this Purana, Jaimini poses some questions to Markandeya, who entrusts 4 birds of the mountains with clarifying Jaimini's queries. Thus Jaimini reaches the Himalayas and clarifies his doubts with the help of the birds. According to Siddhinathananda Swamy, while translating the 'Devi Mahatmyam' 'Ezhuthachan presented the birds in strange fashion. He made Markandeya's birds sing in Malayalam. The birds originally nested in the Vindhya. They were named Pingaksha, Vibodha, Suputra and Sumukha. Ezhuthachan called them five-hued lilting reciters. Later, the parrots were made to sing the Ramayana, Mahabharata and Bhagavata.' (Siddhinathananda Swamy. 'Malayala Vimarsham'. Vol 10. qtd in Gopinathapillai, 20)

There also exists a gap between the self and the other. The self exists because of the Other. But the other is not the soul creator in charge of the self. It is in this parallax between the object and its other that the parallax exists. Here Lacanian psychoanalysts reject some kind of Habermasian communicative action in favour of a more radical object relations. The all or nothing logic of mysticism is operating in the rendering void of the external world, thereby making the subject into an object. Before the deity or the beloved, the mystic Bhakti poet is the last man/woman on earth. It is not through the invocation of a *sensus communis*. It is to these subjects rendered as objects that multiplicity or plurality truly belongs.

The experience of the Other is nevertheless always as a concrete particular other in a concrete, particular situation, not as a "unifying regulative category of my experience since he comes to me through an encounter?" The Other is not a formal condition of possibility for being in the world. The relation to the Other is fundamentally asymmetrical, it is not a question of intersubjectivity, a question that always presupposes symmetry and reciprocity. In other words, the Other is not equivalent to the phenomenological thesis that truth and cognition are intersubjective, ie, that the Other is what the subject can refer to as a guarantee for the objectivity of his cognition. Rather, the Other is that which makes the world disappear by making the subject into an object. Sartre stresses that the Other is not a matter of plurality, since plurality belongs only to objects, either as the multiplicity of objects or as the purely formal concept of God. (Hyldgaard, 238)

## **Between man and deity**

The deity is hallowed by the praise and devotion and presence of the human. Therefore there exists a perceived stress on rituals in the Vedic rituals. Although Bhakti steers clear of a heavily ritualistic doctrine, it does not completely repudiate ritual either. The pantheistic concept of an indwelling God within the commingled mass of humanity would be a simplistic explanation of Bhakti as a movement and literature. Rather than a benign benevolence, the deity of Bhakti can be demanding and violent. This is exemplified in the infant Krishna's 'Kaliyamardana' or the slaying of the many headed serpent that infested and poisoned the waters of the river Yamuna or Kalindi. The divine attributes of man elevated to an exalted position and called deity in everyday language, becomes congealed into a symbolic force that possesses affects and intensities. Deity also manifests as literature and thus literature becomes scripture. Vishnu, according to P.Govinda Pillai, the Marxist ideologue, is the all-encompassing divinity. The versatility and multiplicity of Vishnu makes this deity the locus of Bhakti as a movement. The Alvar saints in Tamil were Vaishnavites. The Nayanars were Saivites. The 'Nalayira Divya Prabandham' comprising 4000 verses of hymns by Alvar saints formed the crux of Vaishnava Bhakti. It was compiled by one Natha Muni in the 12<sup>th</sup> c. CE in Tamil. (Pillai, G. 38) Thus the deity was deified due to the textual effort of devotees, the Alvar saints in this case.

Between good and evil, 'there is no duality of the poles, only the inherent gap of the one.' (Žižek, Parallax Gap, 36) The profanation of the sacred is what blasphemy means in the modern day sense. But in medieval times the idea of Bhakti could have been incorporated into mainstream discourse without attracting the libel of blasphemy. This was possible since there was no symmetry between the sacred and profane aspects of deity. It was not a balancing of negative and positive forces. Rather it was from this conflict that emerged much of the thought of Bhakti itself. The parallax of sacred and profane was constitutive in this sense. Medieval theology was not a dichotomous yin-yang binary of good versus evil.

A horse-headed being is portrayed in several smṛti texts as both a god and a demon. Coomaraswamy demonstrates the unpolarized nature of relation between Vedic gods and demons; it is therefore necessary to distinguish devas from the Western sense of God because: (1) devas and asuras both arise from Prajapathi, the primeval, cosmic puruṣa ('man') and therefore have the same ontological status; (2) both are blinded by their

pride; and (3) asuras were originally considered to be a class of gods which only later came to be depicted as negative beings. This close relationship between the two groups becomes clearer in the bhakti texts wherein both gods and demons are secondary to the Supreme God). (Nayar, 31)

### **The sacred geography of South India:**

The bhakti theology in Southern India owes a lot to its topography. There are sacred groves, arboreal deities, hill temples, animal spirits, and poltergeists etc. that do not keep aloof but are actively involved in the everyday of village life, manipulating well-being of farmers, their crops and cattle. Kerala Bhakti does not have the advantage of an elaborate Tinai structure like Tamil. This is made up by mythical references and stories that dot the land.

The landscape is animated with myths which link with pan-Indian gods Shiva, Vishnu and Devi: on this shoreline, the Devi does penance. that was an evil elephant.. turned to stone by Shiva; this temple marks the place where a peahen with beautiful eyes in its tail was revealed to be the Parvati in disguise; the river there was created by Murugan to quench the thirst of one of his wedding guests who had developed an unbearable craving for water after too much salty rice. (Dalrymple, 184)

### **Bhakti as therapy**

In the Foucault-Chomsky debate, Chomsky foregrounds human innate competence, and this is similar to the originary moment in literature.<sup>22</sup> Just like Kafka created his predecessors in Dostoevsky, Ezhuthachan, pace Žižek, also created his own predecessors in Cheeraman and others. Even though his status as the father of Malayalam is questionable, his primacy in this regard is not.

I stumbled upon Bhakti during a period of personal crisis and ‘torsion’. The dance, movement, music, visual imagery, built architecture and poetry of Bhakti have the ability to offer solace, especially when one finds them in one’s own backyard.<sup>23</sup> After a decade spent in the studying and teaching of English language and literature, my discovery of medieval Malayalam Bhakti

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<sup>22</sup> Chomsky also has famously repudiated Zizek’s ‘theory.’ He even went so far as to call Zizek a ‘charlatan.’

<sup>23</sup> It is precisely in the interstice of the ‘parallax gap’ that these creative expressions occur.

was a grounding experience, something that gave me roots. Another solace was the study and practice of psychoanalysis and psychotherapy, guided by the work of Slavoj Žižek. Soon I came to find uncanny correspondences between the two. Bhakti is the popular literature of the spiritual realm. In this sense it is psychoanalysis turned inwards. Bhakti acts as therapy; life sustaining force in therapy is the word of the ‘other.’

As the hysteric understands it, her speech sustains the Other. Listening to her and thus is the cause of that which she may receive from him in return. From this, the idyll can begin. The speech of the hysteric becomes a pastoral by means of which the subject dedicates her complaint to the Other, whom she certainly does not confuse, at first, with the person of the analyst. On the contrary, the analyst fulfils his function only by keeping quiet: his very silence guarantees the good understanding that the hysteric contracts with the Other. This setting is in every way propitious for the effective deployment of the process of the cure and the development of the transference. (Silvestre, 91)

‘Poetry is psychoanalysis with just one person whereas psychoanalysis itself is poetry with two people.’ This often cited cliché is based on the supposedly healing powers of poetry. I would like to suggest that the medieval Bhakti poetry of Kerala contained therapeutic possibilities for the Malayali psyche which were later neutralised by the advent of colonial modernity and the values of European enlightenment that it brought along with it. The loneliness engendered by poetry is cured by the devotional community that the Bhakti movement created. ‘The focus of the hymns and the hagiography is on the community of bhaktas as against the brahmana’s exclusive rights to salvation and hence were intended to create a sense of community’ (Champakalakshmi, Religion, Tradition and Ideology, 244). This Bhakti public sphere had an impact in shaping the political, economic and social lives in medieval Kerala. Bhakti, without being inordinately vitriolic emerged as a counterpoint to the prevailing social structures. The ideational structures of the medieval Bhakti sphere were not radically different from those of the preceding era. But the contesting forces that Bhakti contended with and the anamorphic nature of Bhakti itself led to a proliferation of medieval cults of shamanic practices, medical traditions like Siddha and literary genres. ‘A pan-Indian tradition of Siddhism is identified among the yogins, the Buddhist sahaja, and the esoteric Natha yogins’ (Champakalakshmi, Religion, Tradition and Ideology, 258).

### The anamorphic nature of Bhakti:

The Bhakti poet observes the deity with the same gaze through which the deity looks upon itself. The symbiotic deity-devotee nature of Bhakti is due to this coincidence of the two gazes. Bhakti poetry looks at the deity through a gaze that creates the deity. It is the anamorphic gaze through which Bhakti observes reality that creates the deity in Bhakti. It is the nature of Bhakti to thus destabilize accepted meanings and norms. It parallax gap in this sense is constitutive. This also explains why Bhakti in certain milieus was considered perverse and heretical. Indian reception of texts and understanding is more intuitive rather than analytical just as there are differences between the nirgun and sagun versions of the deity.

### **Žižek and the ‘torsion of meaning’**

The gap between Deleuze and Foucault’s readings of dualism and monism presents itself as a parallax. There exists a parallax between being and becoming. There also exists a parallax between cause and its effect.

The original Ramayana was inflected with the nuances of Bhakti when it got transcreated into the ‘Adhyatmaramayana.’ In Malayalam also this Bhakti version of Ramayana or the ‘Adhyatmaramayana’ was used as a source text. The difference between the original Ramayana and the ‘Adhyatmaramayana’ is that of anamorphosis. The ‘Adhyatmaramayana’ in its bhakti version is the anamorphically inflected version of the original Ramayana. The parallax operates in the gap between the two.

The anamorphosis or the parallax lies in the softer cadences of Bhakti, which focuses on the devotional, contemplative and philosophical, existential aspects of the source text.

### **The Belatedness of Bhakti:**

Bhakti does not always coincide with the originary event, whether literary or otherwise. Bhakti works on the original source material and thus gives it a different perspective. It is in this gap between the old and the new that the parallax operates. The parallax gap separates the older, rigider version from the newer one with softer cadences, and while the Bhakti version claims the authenticity of the original, it also becomes more accessible and democratic in the process.

Bhakti needn't always be multilayered and nuanced as the original version as is evident in the case of the 'Adhyatmaramayana.' It often appears to be naive and lacking the multiple veneers of the original. The 'Adhyatmaramayana' for instance considers Rama in his divine incarnation alone and forgoes his other dimensions including that of ruler, warrior, lover, father, son etc which are dwelt upon in some length in original.

The divine manifestation of Rama is considered more accessible to the lay devotee than the other dimensions. There appear more incantatory passages and hymns and prayers in the Bhakti version than in the original buttressing the devotional nature of the text as different from the source text.

The anamorphosis or the parallax while creating different perspectives, interestingly bridges the divides between geographical regions, racial categories etc.

Here the terms anamorphosis and parallax can be used interchangeably since both terms refer to the constitutive gap from the original where Bhakti resides. The choice of 'Adhyatmaramayana' over the Valmiki 'Ramayana' is significant. The element of choice exercised at the origin is the foundation of the parallax or the anamorphosis. 'A choice is thus always a metachoice. A choice of the modality of the choice itself.' (Žižek, Parallax Gap, 277)

This intentionality<sup>24</sup> can be deemed to be the source of the Bhakti text. Bhakti in this fashion foregrounds the role of the author in ways that the original text does not. The author as the myth-maker is missing in Bhakti, but is present in the form of the humble devotee throughout the text thus imparting the anamorphic quality to the text.

It was not so much these Sanskrit texts and philosophy which influenced the Bhakti movement as it was the other way round. We would also argue that it was during the process of absorbing and articulating the implicit and nascent philosophical ideas in the regional languages into Sanskrit language and academic idiom, that the Bhakti movement began its decline. (Pillai, G. 43-44)

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<sup>24</sup> For Žižek only the woman who makes the choice not to wear the Islamic 'niqab', is actually making a choice. Wearing it is not a choice, but rather 'the freedom of a forced choice.' Similarly for Žižek, it is not an exercise of choice to eat Chinese food in a Chinese village.

Bhakti occupies the realm of the imaginary, such as in the paintings of Escher and also in Jacques Louis David's 'Death of Marat.' These works of art include large black regions that are designated spots for thought.

The political implications of the parallax are still to be explored. The pluriform ontological existence of various races, groups, sects, convictions and belief provided the ground for a medieval parallax that came into being in the literary corpus of the Bhakti. The medieval Bhakti was not the realm of agitprop, but certainly was the arena for a literary exploration of the multiple modes of being, belief and deity. In this respect what Žižek can offer through his concept of parallax is significant vis-a-vis Bhakti. In the multiple realms of medieval belief, there were numerous modes of belief which have been passed onto the contemporary world by oral and textual processes, which processes have to be analysed in a more detailed study, and are outside of the ambit of the present work. The present study focuses more on the textual artefacts of Bhakti that we have from medieval Kerala, which present a challenge to a evolutionary linguist like Rich Freeman as well as to the cultural theorist in terms of their complex tackling of societal norms and pluriform religious strictures and textures of medieval everyday life practices.

In the present day Indian subcontinent, there are various systems in place including universal adult franchise to ensure equity in society. But in the imaginary realm, the Indian imagination is riddled with subversive strategies to circumvent constitutional provisions and achieve better bargains, electoral or otherwise, for one particular caste or creed. This takes on multiple manifestations including vote-bank politics and agitations against affirmative action. This, in an ironically Žižekian way is in sharp contrast to the medieval scenario where millennia of hierarchy and privilege existed cheek by jowl with a bhakti sensibility that was trying to manifest itself various symbolic formulations, including rituals and texts.

The Saiva and Vaishnava Bhakti poets used the classical yet vernacular Tamil over the more courtly, refined and 'elite' Sanskrit. Saivite Bhakti saints used the vernacular Tamil so profusely in their devotional compositions that it is claimed that 'Tamil almost became a metaphor for Saivism.' (Das, A History, 7)

It is also noted by Sisir Kumar Das that the tension between the vernacular bhashas and the classical Sanskrit vanished in a sort of synthesis with the local Malayalam in the region of



Kerala. This gave rise to the 'fusion poetry' of mani-pravala, literally ruby-coral (mani meaning ruby and pravalam meaning coral). The transition from a proto-Dravidian tongue to Malayalam in Kerala was punctuated by the emergence of mani-pravalam poetry, aided by Sanskrit vocabulary.

Malayalam is closely related to the languages of Tamil and Sanskrit. The language started as a variant of Tamil that was spoken in regions of Kerala. A significant transition from Tamil happened with the introduction of a form of literature called Mani pravalam which freely mixed words from Sanskrit into the language. Most words in traditional Malayalam has its roots in either Tamil or Sanskrit. Due to its lineage to both Sanskrit and Tamil, the Malayalam alphabet has the largest number of letters among the Indian languages. (Govindaraju, 126)

*Leelathilakam*, a 14th century primer of grammar and rhetoric by Bhaskaracharya, dwells on the significance of mani-pravalam poetry in Malayalam. Mani-pravalam poetry of Kerala marks a confluence of Aryan and Dravidian cultures and traditions. A similar known parallel can be found in the oldest Sanskrit dance-drama form called Koodiyattom where the lowly comics use the vernacular Malayalam while the kings, princes and the characters with veera rasa use Sanskrit in their articulation.

According to Ganapathy Subbiah, classical poetry contains the roots of Bhakti poetry as well. These poems reflect the essence of Hinduism and 'god was the model for a supreme hero.' (Subbiah, 8) As Sisir Kumar Das says,

The bhakti has a positive attitude towards life-in-the-world and is rooted in involvement and communion. The bhakti literature that emerged in the medieval period is not a radical transformation of the early 'secular' tradition, but deeply connected with the earlier thought and culture. (Das, A History, 13)

A major opponent of the non-dualist advaita doctrine of Sankara was Ramanuja with his Qualified Monism. Ramanuja's vishishtadvaitavad or qualified monism established the roots of bhakti in South India. His Shri Bhasya was a popular medieval work. His followers Nimbarka and Madhva also buttressed the concept of Bhakti that was founded on the principle of vishishtadvaitavad or qualified monism.

What is important about the medieval world is not its homogeneity, but its the multiple layers. This world is composed of materials coming from different religious sources, not always in harmony with one another...If the medieval India is conspicuous by the intellectual debates that continued for generations, among the dualists and the non-dualists, or among the Saivas and Vaishnavas, it is also a period of search for syncretism. The attempt towards the reconciliation between religions were intensified after the 14th century, i.e. after the consolidation of the Muslim power in India. But the forces of religious syncretism were always present in history. (Das, A History, 21)

This constitutes a critique of pure Bhakti.

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## CONCLUSION: ŽIŽEK'S BELIEF

Faith and belief are the ultimate conundrums of our times. This thesis has attempted to study the belief system of medieval Bhakti through its literary corpus with the help of Žižekian thought. Faith and belief are anathema to many and yet offer solace to some others. How was Bhakti constituted as a space, a fraternity/sorority? That is the question I have pursued throughout this research.

Žižek often quotes an anecdote about the Danish Nobel-winning physicist Niels Bohr, suspending a horse shoe good-luck-charm at the entrance to his house. When questioned about the inconsistency and contradiction inherent in being the world's foremost scientist, as well as a superstitious man, Bohr is said to have replied, 'I am told it works even if I do not believe in it.' This is the structure of belief according to Žižek. Therefore the rationalist arguments against the existence of god/gods are directed along the wrong trajectory, since belief operates on a different realm altogether. Žižek has called himself as a 'Christian atheist.'<sup>1</sup>

The first chapter attempted to introduce Žižek and the concepts that are central to his oeuvre, such as the parallax and the objet petit a, and also his strange fascination for India. India for Žižek is what the Asiatic mode of production was for Karl Marx. It is the ultimate other. I have tried to take this dilemma head on, by charting out Žižek's engagements vis-à-vis India and its culture/philosophy/people.

The second chapter tried to give a map of medieval Bhakti in India with its focus on the cartographic separation of regions. Thus the Southern, Western and Northern regions were charted out. Bhakti, as Disraeli later said about the East, was a career. Here I have ventured to give a definition of Bhakti from various view points. I have also tried to give a hint of what Bhakti means in contemporary India. Bhakti as emotion and bhakti as rasa have been dealt with in some detail here.

Chapter three dealt with Kerala Bhakti in general. It focuses on three major poets of Kerala Bhakti viz. Ezhuthachan, Poonthanam and Cherusseri. I have studied their major themes and tropes as well as their standing in the pantheon of pan-Indian bhakti. The biographies of these

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<sup>1</sup> On online rationalist platforms like the 'Freethinkers' group which is active in Malayalam, many people nowadays identify themselves as 'Hindu atheists' to the chagrin of many.

poets area also relevant to this chapter. Psychoanalytic elements in *Krishnagadha* etc. have also been dealt with.

Chapter four has attempted to find the salient features of Kerala bhakti. What made it special, or worth studying? Where did Kerala figure in the context of pan-Indian bhakti? If Kerala was not a historical backwater, then what were its peculiarities? These questions I have tried to answer. Plurality of Ramayana traditions has been studied. The various Ramayanas of Kerala have been analysed in this chapter, including the literary historical importance of Bhakti and the use of tropes by the major bhakti poets. The sections of Ramayana such as the 'Lakshmanopadesa' and the debate between Hanuman and Sugreeva have been studied. I have tried to place Malayalam Bhakti poetry within the wider matrix of Southern Bhakti movement.

Chapter five has attempted to find common ground between medieval Bhakti poetry of Kerala and the parallax concept of Žižek. I have charted out various internal and external interstices and incoherencies that give rise to the parallax. These include the Sanskrit-Dravidian, gender, deity-devotee, self-other, good-evil, teacher-student and other such interstices.

I have tried in this research to carry out a scientific study of bhakti in so much as psychoanalysis and its philosophy and methods can be deemed 'scientific.' Žižek would say that psychoanalysis is not a science, but it is what sciences should aspire to become. How can a philosophy of abject devotion from four decades ago, be squared with present-day European thought? It is the structure of belief that Žižek looks at rather than the idiosyncrasy of its content.

A man who believes himself to be a kernel of grain is taken to a mental institution where the doctors do their best to convince him that he is not a kernel of grain but a man; however, when he is cured (convinced that he is not a kernel of grain but a man) and allowed to leave the hospital, he immediately comes back, trembling and very scared—there is a chicken outside the door, and he is afraid it will eat him. "My dear fellow," says his doctor, "you know very well that you are not a kernel of grain but a man." "Of course I know," replies the patient, "but does the chicken?" (Žižek: *Žižek's Jokes*, 67)

Does bhakti, and not just the newly enlightened devotee, know that it is mere superstition? It exists despite everything and confounds all expectations and motivates millions among them physicians and scientists and technicians and programmers. Its voracity of appetite has ensured

that there is no aspect of religion or geography or demographic in India that is untouched by Bhakti. There are monks in executive positions and as Chief Minister. Bhakti is a fact of life. It is not a figment of our imagination. The currents that were unleashed in the medieval era flow unabated today. Its philosophical fervor has reduced, yet the devotional content has seen a rise. Elements of bhakti movement have helped created the multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multi-lingual fabric of India. 'To believe-to believe 'directly' without the externalizing mediation of a ritual-is a heavy, oppressive, traumatic burden which, by practicing a ritual, one has a chance of transferring onto an other.' (Žižek, Parallax Gap, 353-54) This is the opposite movement of Bhakti, where one goes for a erasing the difference between the deity and the devotee, seeking immediacy. Žižek quotes Lacan's quip that 'Les non-dupes errent' (the undeceived are mistaken) which is a play on the 'nom du pere'. This would be the focus for this research. For Žižek, the correct Pascalian formula of conjugal life is not 'if somebody doesn't love his/her then marry him/ her, proceed through married life and wait for life', but rather, 'purge this excessive love, make it part of mechanical routine through marriage'. Bhakti would fit into this case of excessive love<sup>2</sup>. There is no exact correspondence between Pascal and Bhakti, but Žižek is firmly within the realm of Bhakti just as much as he is within contemporary Euro-American popular culture. Here Žižek would also quote Lacan's famous quip that 'love is giving something one doesn't have'. True love is thus performative.

Žižek says about the true nature of affect, which could be called the spout of bhakti that 'what music expresses is no longer the 'semantics of the soul' but the underlying noumenal flux of jouissance beyond linguistic meaningfulness. This noumenal dimension is radically different from the pre-Kantian transcendent divine Truth: it is the inaccessible excess which forms the very core of the subject'. (Žižek, Parallax Gap, 229-30)

The blot of the Real, according to Žižek, is revealed in understatement between Real knowledge and symbolic belief. 'As soon as subject comes to 'know too much'gets too close to the unconscious truth, his ego dissolves.' (Žižek, Looking Awry, 40)

Žižek gives an example from quantum mechanics for this 'subject supposed to know'. Two subatomic particles with opposite spin are separately rotated. The opposite spin is maintained.

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<sup>2</sup> Bhakti is an instance of this excessive love, but it doesn't espouse a cynical ritualism to get rid of it, Rather you write yourself into bhakti.

This opposing state of spin is achieved even before the two particles can communicate between each other at the speed of light. This is the Advaitic subject who is supposed to know. All of bhakti is somewhat advaitized, according to Karl Potter. Thus the polemics of bhakti are the polemics of Advaita.

### **Uniqueness of Malayalam Bhakti**

There did not exist a political formation called Kerala, during the medieval period. Therefore it would be better to refer to Malayalam Bhakti rather than Kerala Bhakti. But what exactly are the differentiating qualities of Malayalam Bhakti over the other versions of bhakti that proliferate all over India. Kerala was a geographically distinct zone. In the South-West-North-East axes of proliferating bhakti, Kerala did not figure. Its Dravidian culture is also of importance. The parallax is Žižek's multiculturalism, which is not toleration of the other, but in fact strict policing of sexual habits and mores which are the utmost core of the being of a culture. Thus arranged marriages and codes of honour would be anathemas to him, not to be tolerated on the grounds of politically correct multiculturalism. Rather true multiculturalism lies in the commonality of struggles. (The purgation of caste figures in the agenda of bhakti across the board). The social hierarchy in Kerala was unique with the emergence of non-Brahmin castes from Ezhuthachan's age. There clearly existed a tension between the Temple (Kovil) based Bhakti movement and the sacred grove (Kavu) based cultic bhakti. These two were not mutually exclusive. Often they overlapped. There was a similar toleration of Vaishnavite and Saivite persuasions unlike in other parts of India. Ezhuthachan for example was a devotee of Shiva, though his hero was Rama, the avatar of Vishnu, his 'ishtadevata' (favourite deity).

One significant feature that sets Malayalam bhakti apart is the Manipravalam literary dialect. This is a parallax. It seeped into bhakti as bhakti and vibhakti—a scholarly perspective and what eluded it. It is not like 'there is a change in perspective and it is not a change in the object, but in the perception'. For Žižek, the objects themselves are inconsistent. They change, there is no single truth, not even language. 'From the perspective of slesa, what is particularly relevant is the powerful insight that for Joyce, language is both medium and the message, both the 'theme' and the 'operation'' (Bronner, 264).



Nevertheless bhakti created a community of readership and led to the spread of literacy. Žižek is not a Buddhist. The self exists for him, not a temporal construct. The self for Žižek is a linguistic self. The human being is neither the corporeal body nor its biographical core. That constitutes its symbolic identity. But the 'I' consists of a void, empty self. This self is the self of Bhakti. The Žižekian parallax renders Malayalam bhakti universal, and again it has to retain its specificity. It follows a cycle.

Cherusseri Namboodiri in his 'Krishnagadha' thus depicts the milk-maids pining for Krishna:

Tell us, O mango tree!  
Have you seen the lord of Lakshmi pass this way...  
O nightingale!did you see  
The lord of cowherds go by this route?....  
Tell us O champak!did you see  
The lotus-eyed one walk by with elegance?...  
Tell O Jasmine, did Krishna caress you..  
Black beetles! Have you seen the noble lord  
With whom we sport in amour?....  
Tell us O Mandara!  
Did you see the lotus-eyed one stride by....  
O Kayav! Did you see our lord?  
O bakul! Adorned with splendid flower,.....  
O!pipal, you have always been loyal to Krishna....  
O fig tree! He who has ensnared our mind.....  
O pandanus!have you seen  
The majestic figure of the lord of the cowherds?...  
Antelopes!why do you flee from us?...  
Peacocks!did you happen to see Keshava,  
The one we are looking for?  
Cuckoos!did you see the lord of cowherds  
Pass this way...  
Swans why do you weep all the time?...

Chrysanthemums! you are now the crowning glory  
Of flower plants...  
O njazhal, have you seen the one who glows  
With undimmed brightness?  
O screw pine! please answer me straight,  
When I address the question gently to you.

(Namboodiri, Cherusseri, in Paniker ed., 177-80)

With its profusion of animate and inanimate beings and the deity Krishna himself, this clearly is a post-human world. In one of his later works, *Absolute Recoil*, Žižek says that autonomy of the signifier in reference to the signified, which he calls machine in ghost (an inversion of the ghost in machine) is the most crucial sense of materialism. (Žižek, *Absolute Recoil*, 76) The material world acquires an aura of spirituality. The matter is imbued with spirit. In this inversion, rarefied bhakti would return to its devotional roots.

Krishna Chaitanya in his history of Malayalam literature says that Ezhuthachan was not a pessimist. He possessed an optimism akin to Sophocles, Aeschylus and Euripides and Albert Camus. 'Ezhuthachan is satisfied that essence can be stabilized as an anchorage of life even in the shifting sands of existence. Strength of character, founded on a voluntary commitment to values, is his great answer to pervasive decay. And he defines the concept with a Catholic breadth of insight. "Get rid of your ego-consciousness. Or enlarge it to an identification of your ego with the entire universe". This is the way to the superman through Calvary which Nietzsche missed'. (Chaitanya, 87)

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