

# The Bhagavad Gita

The Divine Song of God

## Devotional Paths To The Divine

You may have seen people perform rituals of worship, or singing *bhajans*, *kirtans* or *qawwalis*, or even repeating the name of God in silence, & noticed that some of them are moved to tears. Such intense devotion or love of God is the legacy of various kinds of bhakti and Sufi movements that have evolved since the eighth century.



Spread of Buddhism

# The Idea Of a Supreme God

Before large kingdoms emerged, different groups of people worshipped their own gods & goddesses. The idea that all living things pass through countless cycles of birth and rebirth performing good deeds & bad came to be widely accepted. Similarly, the idea that all human beings are not equal even at birth gained ground during this period.

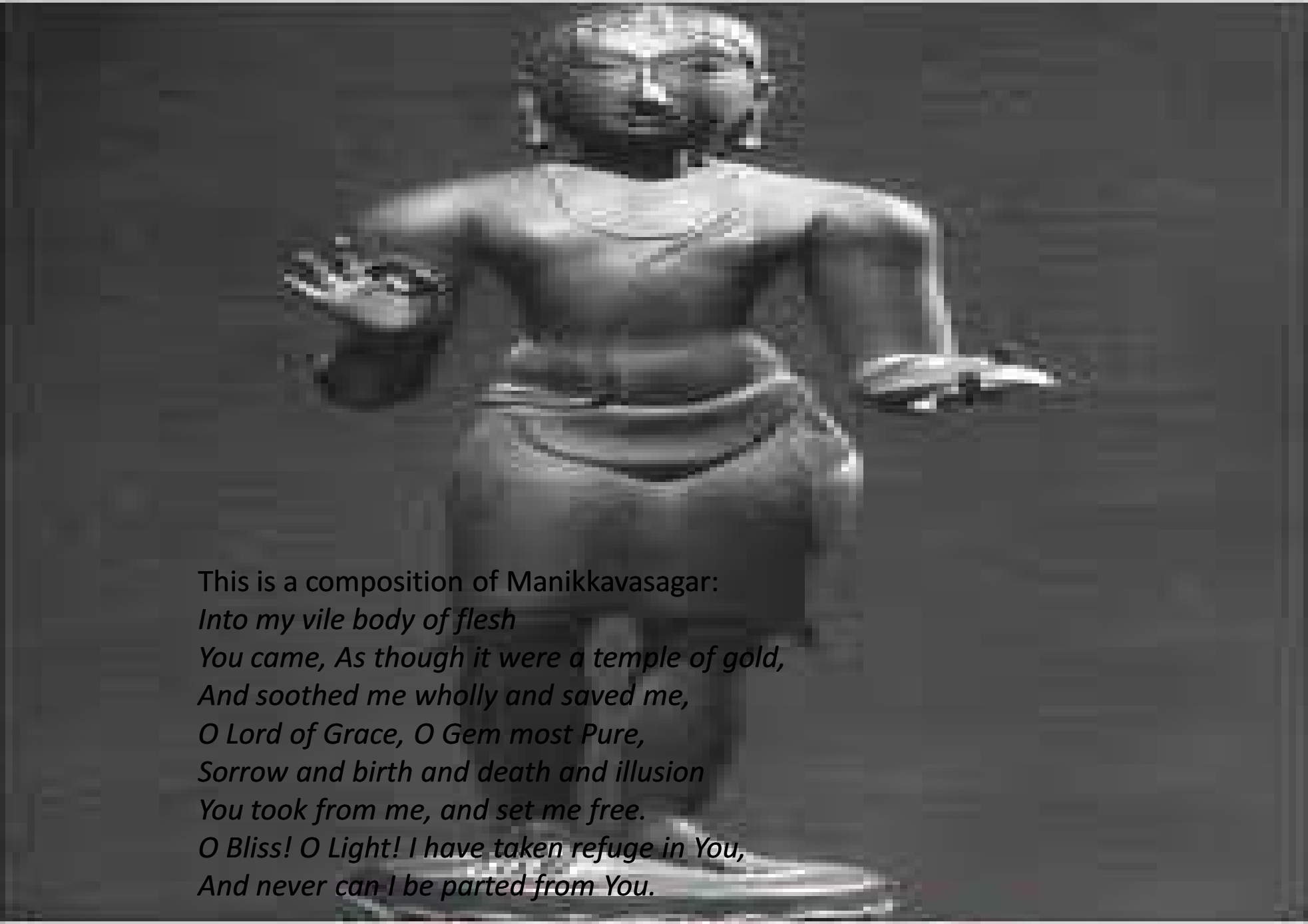
Many people were uneasy with such ideas and turned to the teachings of the buddha or the jainas according to which it was possible to overcome social differences & break the cycle of rebirth through personal effort.

## A New Kind Of Bhakti in South India – Nayanars & Alvars

There were 63 Nayanars, who belonged to different caste backgrounds such as potters, “untouchable” workers, peasants, hunters, soldiers, Brahmans & chiefs. The best known among them were Appar, Sambandar, Sundarar, & Manikkavasagar. There are 2 sets of compilations of their songs – *Tevaram* & *Tiruvacakam*.

There were 12 Alvars, who came from equally divergent backgrounds, the best known being Periyalar, his daughter Andal, Tondaradipoddi Alvar & Nammalvar. Their songs were compiled in the *Divya Prabandham*.

The 7<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> centuries saw the emergence of new religious movements, led by the Nayanars (saints devoted to Shiva) & Alvars (saints devoted to Vishnu) who came from all castes including those considered “untouchable” like the Pulaiyar & the Panars. They were sharply critical of the Buddhists & Jainas & preached ardent love of Shiva or Vishnu as the path to salvation. They drew upon the ideals of love & heroism as found in the Sangam literature (the earliest centuries of the Common Era) & blended them with the values of bhakti. The Nayanars & Alvars went from place to place composing exquisite poems in praise of the deities enshrined in the villages they visited, & set them music.



This is a composition of Manikkavasagar:  
*Into my vile body of flesh  
You came, As though it were a temple of gold,  
And soothed me wholly and saved me,  
O Lord of Grace, O Gem most Pure,  
Sorrow and birth and death and illusion  
You took from me, and set me free.  
O Bliss! O Light! I have taken refuge in You,  
And never can I be parted from You.*

*A bronze image of Manikkavasagar*

