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# KRISHNA BHAKTI OF NARSINH MEHTA, SURDAS, CHAITANYA MAHAPRABHU, AND PURANDARA DASA

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**ABSTRACT**
*The present paper examines the collective consciousness of the Indian populace regarding Krishna worship. It examines the contributions of Narsinh Mehta, Surdas, Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, and Purandara Dasa. Although these people are very different and diverse in their language and culture, and at first sight may appear quite different and even disparate to us, they share an intimate, intense, and rich love of Krishna. These are not only figures; they belong to different regions of India and speak various languages; they also possess diverse socio-cultural backgrounds. But when you read them, in the stories which they tell you of their love for Krishna, you hear an impromptu universalist music.*
**KEYWORDS:** *Krishna Bhakti, Narsinh Mehta, Surdas, Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, Purandara Dasa, Bhakti Movement.*

## INTRODUCTION

The ancient Indian tradition of expressing loving devotion to a divine figure takes the emotively charged form of *bhakti*. As it is practiced and understood in its most ordinary sense, *bhakti* carries a certainly ceremonial and even ritualistic character, and it has musical and quasi-theatrical aspects, because the "bhaktas" who perform it sing hymns and shout solos in worship. This form of prayer became prominent in Medieval times:

> Though *bhakti* can be traced to Vedic times or even earlier to the Harappan culture, as a movement which swept the entire country in its wake, it was truly a medieval phenomenon. While the South of India had a long tradition of *bhakti,* which has come down to us in the utterings of the Vaisnava *Alwars* and Saiva *Nayanars*, *bhakti* as a pan-Indian movement certainly belongs to the middle period of Indian history. It is the propagation of the ideals of *bhakti* embedded in the epic and puranic literature, popularised through the tradition of *kathakaras* or *bhatas* or *caranas* (wandering minstrels) that probably resulted in this flowering of a number of individual *bhaktas* throughout the land. (Rukmani 55)

*Bhakti* is more than performance art. With a long and ancient history in South and North Indian languages, the kind of poetic and theological ideas enshrined in *bhakti* literature easily merit our attention. It is observed:

In Hinduism, one can approach the divine as parent, child, lover, friend, and servant. Such an approach is not found in Christianity and Islam, where God is the all-powerful, all-seeing, all-forgiving judge. (Pattanaik)

The spiritual tradition of the Indian civilization is long-term and full of devotion to Krishna. This worship has been spread over numerous languages and geographical boundaries. It has not been limited to one style and context. The poet-saints of this school have turned out fantastic productions, which, with all their aesthetic value, would make a considerable offering (*prasad*) to the art, music, and dance of India:

> "Of all the Hindu gods and goddesses, Lord Krishna has inspired most poets, musicians, dancers, painters, and sculptors. He has attracted and fascinated the maximum number of ideologists, both religious and otherwise, art historians, scholars, and devotees from all parts of the world; more than any other figure in Hindu mythology" (quoted in Bahl 27)

Four of the most renowned and distinguished representatives of this tradition, who hold, respectively, special poetic, musical, and painterly niches within it, are Narsinh Mehta, Surdas, Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, and Purandara Dasa. But despite all the vast diversities, they form a syncretic whole, which is the pan-Indian veneration of Krishna. Their highly individual and yet perfectly compatible types of devotion must lead us to turn to the bigger cultural context when we attempt to make a comparative analysis. The question posed in this study is why the way that these saints follow is so important, and what objects and acting performances in it tie us to the tradition of the Krishna devotion. The response is based on the fundamental ideas that support the devotional poems of these personalities. The other concept is that of vernacularization. This is the process through which what are held as the sacred manifestations of Hinduism are being transferred out of the upper, elite, classical spaces of Sanskrit into those languages which the great majority of the population, both in India and in other places, can comprehend and relate to.

### Narsinh Mehta

The emotional outpouring of Krishna *Bhakti* in Gujarat takes its most adorable expression in Narsinh Mehta. His *kirtans*, a form of devotional song, carry us, as they have carried countless others, to the one single and most powerful fact we need to remember about Krishna *Bhakti.* That is this: the essence of Krishna *Bhakti* is found in the intimate, fulfilling love of the devotee for the divine and

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vice versa. Indeed, this simplicity may seem to be the bedrock of *Bhakti* everywhere, but it surely finds its most exquisite expression in Narsinh Mehta. Beyond this, however, Narsinh Mehta has something very powerful to say because he is a lawyer of sorts—in a figurative sense. He is a lawyer for the down-and-out. In a sense, he argues for the poor; he challenges the caste hierarchy. He asks us to empathize with the road-weary, the forsaken, and the downtrodden; they are all on the way to being true devotees.

> Narsinh Mehta composed soulful bhajans that celebrated Krishna's *leelas*, inspiring devotion among ordinary people. His life exemplifies love, surrender, and service as central tenets of *Bhakti Yoga*. Even centuries later, his songs continue to resonate across India and beyond, reminding devotees that spirituality is accessible to all, regardless of caste, wealth, or social standing. ("Narsinh Mehta: The Saint-Poet of Krishna *Bhakti* in Gujarat")

**Surdas**

Surdas will always remain the outstanding poet of *Braj Bhasha*. He depicts Krishna using the emotional lens of *vatsalya rasa*. It implies the tender love a mother has for her child. This is the emotional core of Surdas's *Sur Sagar*, his ocean of poems and songs about Krishna. From this work arise such poems as "Maiya Main Nahin Makhan Khayo," which capture not just Krishna's innocent and charming play but also enshrine the spiritual bones of tender love and childhood divinity that are the emotional core of Surdas's Krishna. For Surdas, the way to the divine is through the kind of emotional intimacy and even silliness that is the very essence of a child and parent relationship. Surdas takes ordinary tales and imbues them with the extraordinarily powerful meaning of young Krishna and those "child-like" divine experiences that form the essence of most parents' relationships with their children.

> The padas (short poems) of Sur are usually classified into: a) Vinaya poems (poems of salutation), b) Balakrishna poems (poems about the childhood of Krishna and c) viraha poems, or poems of separation and the pangs of separation of the Gopis from Krishna. The story of Krishna's birth and the incidents of his childhood and youth are well-known throughout India and are referred to throughout the *Sur Sagar*. This story is told in the tenth chapter of the *Bhagavat Purana,* should be read by anyone interested in any of the Krishnaite poets. (Surdas 24)

**Chaitanya Mahaprabhu**

Chaitanya Mahaprabhu's view of Krishna *Bhakti* seems to be more reachable, more emotionally resounding, and, in some ways, more democratic than the classic versions we have been considering. Chaitanya was a 15th-century saint from Bengal who gave us an alternative perspective on *Bhakti*. He was less concerned with the details of devotion, as set out in classical texts, than with the inner emotional devotion that makes one truly a devotee. He thus presents us a form of *Bhakti* that is more about feeling than about thought, more about being than about doing, more about love for God than about the kind of love for God that leads, to use the phrase of one of our earlier authors, to a "serious but joyous" path of devotion.

> When socio, political, religious conditions in Bengal were in a state of turmoil, when man was dissatisfied with his surroundings, Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu appeared as an incarnation of 'God' or 'Love', giving his message of Love and *Bhakti* to mankind in the last quarter of the fifteenth Century in Bengal. He was an ardent devotee of Lord Krishna and gave religion a new meaning and a wider interpretation. He loved God profoundly and recognized keenly and truly the sparks of God in each and every created being. (Vati 345)

Kirtan, as a public practice of devotion to Krishna, was lifted to an entirely new level through Chaitanya's influence. This congregational form of singing and chanting allowed everyone to join together. For the first time, people could perform this act of devotion together in an inclusive way that transcended divisions of caste and class and allowed all segments of society to sing with and for each other and to be in each other's presence. For Chaitanya, the eponymous avatar of Krishna in 1486, was no less than the next step toward a fully nondiscriminatory, universal form of *Bhakti.*

**Purandara Dasa**

Purandara Dasa hails from Karnataka. He is a figure of devotion and one who expresses it through the intimate emotional style of music known as *dasya bhakti*. In this genre, the devotee expresses himself as a kind of musical servant. He does not serve Krishna in person, but he serves him through musical compositions. "The saint-poet is said to have composed about five lakh *kritis, keertanas*, and *ugabhogas* in Kannada and Sanskrit" (Sathyaprakash M R). Purandara Dasa seems to have invented a use of musical form that not only pleases Krishna but also uses the kind of humility and surrender that he seems to have in abundant supply. Not only does Purandara Dasa serve an extraordinarily sweet Krishna, but he also lays down the structural foundation for what will become an extremely formalized artistic experience known as Carnatic music.

The overarching *Bhakti* practice of using vernacular language came to be reflected in Purandara Dasa's decision to compose in Kannada. Both the structure and the content of Kannada devotional songs make them highly suitable for the rendering of Carnatic music. Though he lived and worked several centuries ago, and though he composed during what could be considered a musical prehistory of sorts in South India, Purandara Dasa is regarded as the "founding father" of the Carnatic music tradition, and his songs remain an integral part of the classical music repertoire performed in both educational (*pada*, or song) rendering contexts and worship situations.

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**Comparative Perspective**

When we see the four saints together in one perspective, we can see that each of them has a specific aspect of religious life to give us as an intercessor between us and the Divine. That each has a specific mood or feeling-tone (called a rasa in classical rasa-theory in aesthetics) to bring to the larger congeries of modes of Krishna *Bhakti*. The most obvious gift of Narsinh Mehta to us is that of the *Shringara Rasa.* He chants love songs to his Krishna. Surdas is the perfect devotee of *Vatsalya Rasa*, the affectionate, protective, and parental *rasa.* His Krishna is the innocent child. Chaitanya Mahaprabhu embodies the intensity of emotional longing of *Bhakti Rasa*, the collective, communal love of all his devotees, sung in ecstatic *bhajans*. Purandara Dasa teaches us the need to be humble when we do any act of devotion. These four saints are significant lamps of hope on the way to *Bhakti.*

Spirituality was obtainable for all, thanks to the use of local languages. The use of Gujarati, Braj, Bengali, and Kannada as "poetry in popular forms" has certainly helped in that regard. This is not to say that the high-context poetry of the north is widely understood in the south or even comprehensible to all recipients in its own linguistic region. The shared belief of the four saints is that devotion must go hand in hand with the transformation of one's ethics. They say that their writing is not just intellectual but aims at an emotional connection with the reader, and that connection might be better described as a synthesis of emotion and ethics. Because it is not purely philosophical, *Bhakti* as a path to knowing Krishna is obviously not just another theoretical system. It's more like a cultural force, a living tradition that one can enter.

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