

Classic Poetry Series

Sant Surdas
- poems -

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Sant Surdas(1478 - 1581)

There is scanty information about the life of Sant Surdas, (The dates of his date and birth are not really very clear), the medieval poet-singer of Braj the land associated with Lord Krishna. His compositions are in Braj Bhasha a dialect of Hindi that was considered crude at the time. Surdas' works are some of those credited with raising this dialect to a literary status.

Surdas was born blind to poor parents and because of this he was a victim of neglect and abuse. He left home at the tender age of 6.

The greatest blessing of Surdas's life came when Sri Vallabhacharya, the celebrated exponent of the Shuddhadvaita. also known as Pushti Marga, accepted him as his disciple. From his teacher he received knowledge of hindu philosophy.

He memorized the Srimad Bhagavata and other hymns in Sanskrit.

He portrayed in exquisite poetry the life of Krishna, especially child Krishna, in such vivid detail that he has not been equalled by any saint or poet, not even Kalidasa, in describing childhood.

It is one of the marvels in the realms of literature how a blind poet could portray in such meticulous and colourful detail the childhood of Krishna, stage by stage. Krishna's cutting his first tooth, his uttering of the first word, his taking the first step unaided, are all occasions for Surdas to compose inspired songs which are sung even to this day, in hundreds of homes, by mothers who see child Krishna in their own children.

The love that had been denied to him as a child flows by means of his songs on, the love that was showered on Bala Gopala in Braj by Yashoda, Nandagopa, the Gopis and the Gopas.

Surdas never entertained any idea of marriage but saw in Sri Krishna the eternal lover and he portrayed the love between Radha and Krishna as ethereal love-the irresistible attraction the individual soul has for the Oversoul or of the Jivatma for the Paramatma.

His work consists primarily of three major compilations, the Sur-Saravali, the Sahitya-Lahiri and the Sur-Sagar. The Saravali is supposed to have

originally one hundred thousand verses but many have been lost forever. It is

based on the analogy of the Holi festival, by far the most popular of the festivals of the time, and always associated with Krishna as part of his Divine Play. Apart from being great narrative poetry they are also significant sources of information about the past.

The Sahitya-Lahiri is supposedly a treatise of various forms of poetical composition, dealing primarily with Bhakti.

The Sur-Sagar is his masterpiece, the 'Oceanic work' as its name indicates and remains the most influential and important of all his works. It deals with the life of Krishna in detail.

His fame was wide spread though he never left his native land, even the Mughal emperor Akbar paid homage to him.

Awake O! Prince Of Braj

Awake, Krishna,
awake the lotus-petals
open the water-lilies droop
the bumblebees have left
the creepers cocks crow,
and birds chirp on the trees.
The cows are in the byre lowing;
they run after their calves;
the moon fades before the sun.
Men and women arise
and joyfully sing their songs;
Krishna, of hands lotus-like awake,
for the day is about to dawn.

Sant Surdas

Breakfast

O Hari, 'tis morn, awake, there's water in the jar for you to wash your face no need to hurry there's plenty of time.

I'll bring you whatever you like for your breakfast- dried fruits, butter, honey and bread.

Says Suradasa, Yashoda's heart overflows with joy when her gaze alights on her darling boy.

Sant Surdas

Krishna Approaches Radha

Krishna said, 'O fair beauty, who are you?
Where do you live? Whose daughter are you?
I never yet saw you in the lanes of Braj.'

Radha said, 'What need have I to come this way?
I keep playing by my door.
But I hear that some son of Nanda
is in the habit of stealing butter and curds.'

Krishna said, 'Look, why should I appropriate
anything that's yours? Come, let's play together.'

Suradasa says: By his honied words,
Krishna, the crafty prince of amorists,
beguiled Radha and put her at ease.

Sant Surdas

Krishna Awakes

Krishna awake, for the day has dawned:
large, deep and lotus-like,
your eyes are as in the love-shaped lake
a pair of swans even a million Kamadevas cannot vie
with the bewitching beauty of your face;
the sun rises in the east,
a crimson ball the night is going
and the moonlight pales
the lamps turn dim
and the stars fade out
as though the bright radiance of wisdom's rays
dispels the pleasures that the senses tire,
and the light of hope chases away
the murky darkness of despair and doubt.

Listen, the birds sing
aloud with glee O sweet child,
life of my life,
my sole wealth,
O darling boy,
bards and minstrels
sing your praises,
saying 'victory! victory!'

Clusters of lotuses burst into bloom
the bumblebees humming with sweet sound
leave the lotuses;
as though the devout renouncing worldly ties,
in your love drowned
chant your name as they go about.

Hearing his mother's words with love
drenched the Lord of Mercy arose from his bed;
the world's woes vanished,
maya's net was rent.

Says Suradasa,
'Seeing his lotus face delusion fled;
all doubts and dualities were destroyed and I found in Govinda eternal joy.

Sant Surdas

Krishna Beginning To Speak

Mohan's begun to say 'Maiya Maiya,'
And 'Baba Baba' to Nanda,
Balaram He's calling 'baiya'
From atop the house Yasoda shouts
Taking the name of kanhaiya.
Don't go far to play my darling
Someone's cow will hit ye.
The gopas and gopis celebrate boisterously
In each house there is festivity
Surdas, for a glimpse of the Lord
My all is surrendered to the Almighty.

Sant Surdas

Krishna Complains About His Older Brother

O mother mine, Dau (Balram) forever teases me.
you never gave birth to me,
and I was bought in the market.
this is what he tells me
o mother mine, Dau forever teases me.
fed up of his teasing ways,
I don't go out to play.
who is your mother?
and who is your father?
again and again he says.
Yasoda's fair, so also Nanda,
how come you're so dark?
Dau provokes, the gopas laugh,
and all have such a lark.
me, mother, you want to beat,
but Dau you never even scold,
seeing the anger on Mohan's face
Yasoda's joy was untold,
listen Kanha, Balbhadra is naughty,
wicked from his birth,
you're my son, and I your mother,
I swear by mother cows worth!

Sant Surdas

Krishna Crawling

Chuckling, Kanha came crawling,
Trying to catch His reflection
In the bejewelled courtyard of Nanda.
One moment He would stare at His shadow
Then move His hands to hold it
Chuckling in delight, two teeth showing
Again and again He would try.
Calling Nanda to come and see
Yasoda watched in joy
Then covering Sur's Lord with her aanchal
She began to feed her boy.

Sant Surdas

Krishna Denying He Stole The Butter

O mother mine, I did not eat the butter
come dawn, with the herds,
you send me to the jungle,
o, mother mine, I did not eat the butter.
all day long with my flute in the jungles
at dusk do I return home.
but a child, younger than my friends
how could I reach up to the butter?
all the gopas are against me
on my face they wipe the butter,
you mother, are much too innocent,
you believe all their chatter.
there is a flaw in your behaviour,
you consider me not yours,
take you herd-stick and the blanket
I'll dance to your tune no longer.
Surdas, Yasoda then laughed,
and took the boy in her arms,
mother mine I did not eat the butter.

Sant Surdas

Krishna Goes To The Woods

O Krishna, darling of Gokula, awake

I have brought you milk, curd and sugar-candy come and partake of these delicacies: your pals are at the door, calling you to play; the sun has risen and it's time to go to the woods.

Hearing her words Krishna joyfully arose and after breakfasting departed for the woods Says Suradasa, my heart's always where the Lord is.

Sant Surdas

Krishna In The Cradle

Yasoda lulling Hari to sleep,
Shaking the cradle, cuddling and fondling,
Singing to Him a song.
My darling is sleepy
Why doesn't sleep come along?
Come sleep, come quickly
Kanha for you does long.
Sometimes He closes His eyes
Sometimes His lips are aflutter.
Thinking He has fallen asleep
Yasoda stops her singing.
Awake still, He's up suddenly
Enjoying Yasoda's song.
Such joy as Yasoda feels
Is unattainable to the gods.

Sant Surdas

Krishna Learning To Walk

Hands stretched out hesitantly,
A foot on the ground unstably,
Yasoda, teaching the Lord to walk.
Sometimes watching His adorable face
Storing away the joy in her heart,
Sometimes praising the family deity:
Give long life to her Kanhaiya.
Sometimes calling to Bal
Two to play in her courtyard.
Surdas see the Lords leela
The lustre of bliss of Nandraiya (Yasoda).

Sant Surdas

Krishna Learns To Walk

Kanha walks

Two steps at a time,

Yasoda's desires see

Fulfilment sublime.

'Runuk jhunk' sing His anklets,

A sound

So pleasing to the mind.

He sits,

But then is up immediately,

A sight difficult to describe.

All the ladies of Braj tire

Of seeing such beauty divine.

Sant Surdas

Krishna Questions His Hair Braid Not Growing

Mother, when will my hair-braid grow?
milk you said will make it grow,
but still it remains so short.

Mother when will my hair-braid grow
you said like Bal it would be strong,
his braid has grown fat and long,
combing , braiding, bathing, drying,
to the ground like a serpent writhing.
for me you say milk is better.
never delicious bread and butter,
Sur, long live the two brothers,
the twosome of hari and haldhar.

Sant Surdas

Krishna Returning With The Herd

Mohan comes herding the cows,
crown of peacock feathers on his head,
garland of forest flowers on his chest,
in his hand a wooden staff,
his body wrapped in cow-dust.
A band around his waist
and from his feet the sound of anklets
there amidst his cow-boy friends
Shyam comes. His yellow garments standing out
like lightning amidst the clouds.

Sant Surdas

Krishna Wanting The Moon

Mother, the moon I want as my toy.
I will roll on the floor,
Not come to your lap,
Nor have my hair-braid combed.
No longer will I be your child
I will only be Nand baba's boy.
Listen son, come to me
There's a secret from bal we can hide.
Hiding her smile, Yasoda said,
I'll give you a brand new bride.
Quick then, Mother, I swear by you
A wedding is what I'd like.

Sant Surdas

Krishna's Meal

Kanha eats in Yasoda's lap.
some he eats, some he drops,
as the ladies of Nandgaon watch,
some he eats and some he puts
in Nanda's mouth,
this joy is beyond recount.
some he eats, some gives to gopas,
butter in his hands, curd in doniyas.
The joy of Yasoda
the three worlds cannot account.
the meal is over, Kanha washes,
for Sur the left-overs count.

Sant Surdas

Merciful Krishna

See the greatness of Krishna;
though Lord, Father and Master of the world
he willingly bears the arrogance of his close devotees
Shiva and Brahma were roaring mad
when Bhrigu kicked them,
but he gently pressed the sage's foot
when it struck his breast!
Which of the gods
can emulate him?
He befriends selflessly;

Embracing his foe Ravana's brother, Vibhisana' as lovingly as his own
brother Bharata, sending to heaven the demoness Putana

who tried to kill him'-
Such is Sura's Lord,
the selfless Giver.

Sant Surdas

Nanda Beholds Krishna's Face

Parted nightlong from his beloved child
Nanda could no longer restrain himself
and lifting from his face the coverlet gazed upon it;
no more the night was oppressive:
the gods it seemed had churned the sea,
and through its foam the moon was seen resplendent in the sky."

Says Suradasa, the cowherd lads and maids learning that their beloved Krishna was awake forgot all else and ran to his bedside.

Sant Surdas

Nanda's Darling Child

Who can contain his joy, say, on seeing the lotus-like lovely face of Nanda's darling child when he awakes?

His beauty infatuates sages, and destroys the pride of Kama, it captivates the hearts of hundreds of young girls. When he softly smiles the gleam of his teeth seems as though rubies have been stringed with pearls.

When my Lord, Nanda's lovely child goes out, says Suradasa, the people of Braj are bewitched by his loveliness.

Sant Surdas

Secret Signs

Krishna conveyed by signs to clever Radha. [he could not speak out as her girl friends were with her] to make a pretence of milking the cows, and picking up the milkpail come to meet him in the meadow. Nanda, his foster-father, would also be there to have the cows counted and verified, and he would bring him along too. So they would have a chance to meet. Radha's heart rejoiced at their mutual resolve. But that lovely golden-hued girl, feeling abashed, hid her face in her arms. Krishna amorously lifting it up gazed at her lovingly. They kept their hidden love to themselves. Says Suradasa as Krishna went on speaking sweet nothings, Radha blushed with shame.

Sant Surdas

The Course Of Love

Seeing Radha stand alone, Krishna came from behind and blindfolded her with his hands. But his hands could not fully cover her large and elongated vivacious eyes. They shone out from within his fingers as a serpent's gem which it had disgorged and hid between its fangs;" or as Rahu finding the sun and Mars together, had pounced and held them fast. Krishna does not have any self-interest, for there is nothing for him to desire or achieve. But he removes the grief of separation of those whom he loves. His eyes came close to Radha's, and his lips were on hers. It was as though the lotuses forgetting their opposition to the moon had opened their petals to be kissed by the moon rays. Says Suradasa, Krishna's loving embrace removed from Radha. the sorrow of her parting.

Sant Surdas

The Deeds Of Krishna

There is no end to the deeds of Krishna:
true to his promise, he tended the cows in Gokula;
Lord of the gods and compassionate to his devotees,
he came as Nrisingha
and tore apart Hiranyakashipa.
When Bali spread his dominion
over the three worlds,
he begged three paces of land from him
to uphold the majesty of the gods,
and stepped over his entire domain:
here too he rescued the captive elephant.
Countless such deeds figure in the Vedas and the Puranas,
hearing which Suradasa
humbly bows before that Lord.

Sant Surdas

The First Meeting Of Radha And Krishna

Krishna went playing in the lanes of Braj,
a yellow silk garment round his waist,
holding a top and a string to spin it with,
a crown of peacock-feathers adorning his head
his ears with charming ear-rings decked,
his teeth flashing brighter than the sun's rays,
his limbs anointed with sandalwood-paste.

On the Yamuna bank he chanced to see Radha;
a tika mark of turmeric on her brow,
dressed in a flowing skirt and blue blouse,
her lovely long wreathed hair dangling behind,
a stripling, fair, of beauty unsurpassed
with he a bevy of fair milkmaids:

Krishna's eyes met her's;
love woke in his heart,
says Suradasa, bewitched by her,
he gazed and gazed.

Sant Surdas

The Formless Brahma Has Incarnated As Krishna

Krishna awoke;

Yashoda was enraptured to see his face blooming as a lotus that captures the rising sun's first rays. Taking off the coverlet she said, 'awake, darling boy, awake, your loveliness makes me swoon your bewitching face is like the full moon seen through the sea's foam when it was churned for nectar.'

He for whom the Shrutis say 'not this, not this? whose name is chanted by Brahma, Shesha and Shiva that Formless Brahma has taken birth in Braj, in human form, so 'tis heard.

Sant Surdas

The Invigorating Dawn

Awake, O Krishna awake,
the night has gone arise,
no longer laze breathe the pure air of early morn;
the cowherd-lads come and gaze at you,
and seeing you asleep,
depart as swarms of bumblebees
fly from the lotus clusters.

O darling boy,
dark as the tamala,
if you don't believe me,
open your large eyes
and see for yourself.

Sant Surdas

The Lord Helps His Devotees

The voice falters
when it sings of the deeds of the Lord
who's an ocean of mercy.
He gave guileful Putana, who posed as his mother, a
mother's reward!
He of whom the Vedas and the Upanishads sing as the Unmanifest,
let Yashoda bind him with a rope,
lamented Ugrasena's grief,
and after killing Kansa made him king
paying him obeisance, bowing low;
Freed the kings held captive by jarsandha
at which the kingly hosts sang his praises;
removing Gautama's curse
he restored life to stone-turned Ahalya:
all in a moment he rescued Braj's ruler from the sea-monster running to his
aid as a cow to her calf,"
he came hastening to rescue the king of the elephants;
he got Namadeva's hut thatched.
says Suradasa, O, make Hari hear my prayer.

Sant Surdas

The Lord Is His Devotees' Slave

Whatever is a devotee's
caste, clan, family, or name,
Rama's love for him is the same.

Beggar and king
are one to him.

Say, of what caste could be
Brahma or Shiva?

Rama will never abide
in the egotistic man's heart
therefore his slave, Suradasa,
has abandoned pride.

Rama was born in the Raghu clan
Krishna found his home in Gokula.

Words fail to tell of
the Lord's love
universal, all-embracing;
Dhruva was a Kshatriya,
Prahlada a demon and Vidura the son of a maid:
yet the Lord gave them his supreme love,
Krishna washed the devotees' feet
at the Rajasuya.

The Lord is the slave
of his devotees
age after age.
The tongue can't relate
his countless deeds.

Says Suradasa, the Puranas and Vedas
are witness to these.

Sant Surdas

The Welcome Of The Women Of Braj

'Tis morn, O Krishna, awake, all the pretty young milkmaids are calling for you;
arise O Braj's prince, The sun is up in the sky, the moon pales, the tender tamala
trees are in full bloom .

The women of Braj have stringed a garland of flowers of many kinds and wait to
greet you. Arise dear child, wash your face and have your breakfast, O my
heart's delight!

Says Sura, my Lord of large lotus-like eyes is the abode of bliss that never
abates.

Sant Surdas

Yasoda Inducing Krishna To Stay Nearby

Kanha, don't go so far to play,
you do not know the 'hau' is here,
I've learnt of it today.
one boy came running just now
I saw him crying away,
the 'hau' clips the ears away
of little boys astray.
come let us be up and gone
to near our place of stay,
Sur, Shyam on hearing this,
with Balaram came away.

Sant Surdas