

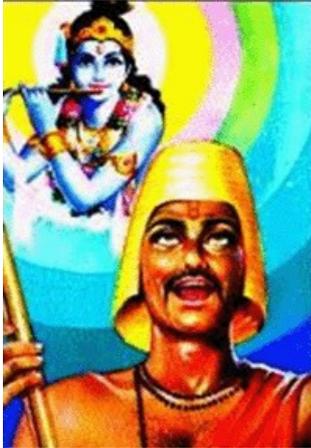


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Glory of Bharath » Santh Darsan

Surdas



Surdas, the 15th century sightless saint, poet and musician, is known for his devotional songs dedicated to Lord Krishna. Surdas is said to have written and composed a hundred thousand songs in his magnum opus the 'Sur Sagar' (Ocean of Melody), out of which only about 8,000 are extant. He is considered a saint and so also known as Sant Surdas, a name which literally means the "slave of melody". The time of Surdas's birth and death are uncertain and suggest that he lived over a hundred years, which make the facts even murkier. Some say, he was born blind in 1479 in Siri village near Delhi. Many others believe, Surdas was born in Braj, a holy place in northern Indian district of Mathura, associated with the exploits of Lord Krishna. His family was too poor to take good care of him, which led the blind boy to leave home at the tender age of 6 to join a wandering group of religious musicians. According to one legend, one night he dreamt of Krishna, who asked him to go to Vrindavan, and dedicate his life to the praise of the Lord. A chance meeting with the saint Vallabharacharya at Gau Ghat by the river Yamuna in his teens transformed his life. Shri Vallabhacharya taught Surdas lessons in Hindu philosophy and meditation and put him in the path of spirituality. Since Surdas could recite the entire Srimad Bhagavatam and was musically inclined, his guru advised him to sing the 'Bhagavad Lila' - devotional lyrical ballads in praise of Lord Krishna and Radha. Surdas lived in Vrindavan with his guru, who initiated him to his own religious order, and later appointed him as the resident singer at Srinath temple in Govardhan.

Surdas' lilting music and fine poetry attracted many laurels. As his fame spread far and wide, the Mughal emperor Akbar (1542-1605) became his patron. Surdas spent the last years of his life in Braj, the place of his birth and lived on the donations, which he received in return of his Bhajan singing and lecturing on religious topics, until he died in c. 1586. Surdas was profoundly influenced by the Bhakti movement - a religious movement which focused on deep devotion, or 'bhakti', for a specific Hindu deity, such as Krishna, Vishnu or Shiva that was prevalent in Indian between c 800-1700 AD, and propagated Vaishnavism. Surdas's compositions also found place in the Guru Granth Sahib, the holy book of the Sikhs.

Although Surdas is known for his greatest work - the Sur Sagar, he also wrote Sur-Saravali, which is based on the theory of genesis and the festival of Holi, and Sahitya-Lahiri, devotional lyrics dedicated to the Supreme Absolute. As if Surdas attained a mystical union with Lord Krishna, which enabled him to compose the verse about Krishna's romance with Radha almost as he was an eyewitness. Surdas' verse is also credited as one that lifted the literary value of the Hindi language, transforming it from a crude to a pleasing tongue.



Surdas is considered as a Bhagat in Sikhism and his works, known as 'Surdas bani' are inserted in the Guru Granth Sahib, the holy book of the Sikhs. 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.



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Surdas with his Lord



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