




# The Agonistic Poetics of *Dāśya-bhāva*: the Soteriological Confrontation Between Deity and Devotee

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## Abstract

The devotional literatures across the Hindu bhakti traditions of medieval India are shaped by distinctive styles of affective responses to the divine reality. A theme which recurs in several layers of their songs is a theological dialectic between divine majesty and divine accessibility; the divine is not only simply transcendent in the sense of being a distant deity but is also immanently present in and through a range of human sensitivities, emotions, and affectivities. We will highlight the dialectic in the devotional songs of three medieval figures, Tulsīdās (c. 1600), Sūrdās (c. 1600), and Mādhavadeva (1489–1596), which are structured primarily by the devotional attitude of a servant (*dāsa*) towards the Lord. As we will see, this theological servitude is not to be understood as a form of abject servility, for the three poets, in their somewhat distinctive ways, can not only speak of the Lord as a friend and as a lover, but can even level various kinds of complaints, challenges, and accusations at the Lord. Thus, if the Lord's transcendental sovereignty is emphasised by the devotee through the modes of self-censure, the Lord's immanent availability is also highlighted through the protests that the devotee fervently makes to the seemingly uncaring Lord.

**Keywords** *Bhakti* · Tulsīdās · Sūrdās · Mādhavadeva

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Mādhavadeva (1489–1596), which are structured primarily by the devotional attitude of a servant (*dāsa*) towards the Lord. As we will see, this theological servitude is not to be understood as a form of abject servility, for the three poets, in their somewhat distinctive ways, can not only speak of the Lord as a friend and as a lover, but can even level various kinds of complaints, challenges, and accusations at the Lord. Thus, if the Lord's transcendental sovereignty is emphasised by the devotee through the modes of self-censure, the Lord's immanent availability is also highlighted through the protests that the devotee fervently makes to the seemingly uncaring Lord.

Tulsīdās, Sūrdās, and Mādhavadeva were key figures in the 'vernacularisation' of Vedantic themes, where narratives from texts such as the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* were creatively transposed to the media of evolving languages in medieval North and north-eastern India. The *Rāmcaritmānas*, for which Tulsīdās is most well-known, is not simply a retelling of Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa*, but is a creative rendering of several sections of the original. Both Sūrdās and Mādhavadeva worked with themes from the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*, highlighting the infant Kṛṣṇa's childhood sports, and the lamentations of the cowherd women on his leaving his childhood home. We will explore a specific petitionary style of devotional poetry, in the registers of the Braj-bhāṣā of Tulsīdās and Sūrdās, and the medieval Assamese of Mādhavadeva, where the repeated affirmation of the devotee's wretched condition in the mires of *saṃsāra* is correlated with an adoration of the deity's transcendental purity and the salvific power of the deity's name. Crucially, a key aspect of the perfection of Lord Rāma or Lord Kṛṣṇa is that the Lord is the 'purifier of the fallen' (*patita pāvana*). Thus, while the Lord remains metaphysically untouched by the devotee's ignorance, affliction, and suffering, the Lord can be appealed to for help, and as we will see, even rebuked on occasion for not living up to the designation of delivering the fallen. Speaking of this trope in poets such as Sūrdās, Hawley (2015, p. 301) argues that they 'lambast the Deity for failing to rescue them, as would be required if he were faithful to the many names by which he is touted as Savior of the Fallen. For such a reputation, indeed, he is indebted to his human devotees, and now he defaults precisely with respect to them'. Thus if one strand of their devotional poetry highlights the miserable plight of human beings in the fearsome age of Kali, another strand strikes the notes of a confident assurance that the Lord will stay true to the scriptural description as the supreme deliverer of the fallen. The relation between the servant and the divine master in this second strand almost undergoes a theological inversion; here, the devotees make bold to speak on equal terms with the deity, protesting that their Lord is not living up to the divine name, and thus, not delivering them from *saṃsāra* is not becoming of the divine nature. With distinctive variations, Tulsīdās, Sūrdās, and Mādhavadeva elaborate the devotional trope of magnifying their own wretchedness and exalting the mercy of the Lord; they offer self-censuring judgements that they are the greatest of the fallen, and invite their Lord, who is known as the one who helps the distressed, to deliver them from their worldly agonies, afflictions, and imperfections. If the Lord were not to heed their call, the Lord's fame and glories, announced by the scriptures, would fade away, for the world would know that the Lord's devotees continue to languish in misery even after appealing to the Lord's mercy. Thus, in this soteriological confrontation, if the Lord were to remain indifferent, the Lord would, in fact, lose the match.

## Tulsīdās Petitions Rāma

The *Vinaypatrikā*, the ‘Petition to Rāma’, of Tulsīdās is composed of several layers whose themes alternate between exaltation of the cosmic greatness of the name of Rāma, eulogies to Rāma who is a sweet lover of the devotee, and reminders to Rāma that he is known all over the world as the ‘purifier of the fallen’. In his major work, the *Rāmcaritmānas*, Tulsīdās eloquently expresses his devotional love for the omnipresent Rāma; however in this article, our focus is the motif, in the *Vinaypatrikā*, of self-abasement before the Lord whom he beseeches to deliver him from his miserable condition. The poet takes us through a series of hymns to various gods and goddesses, and then, he laments his miserable condition, pleads with his master Rāma to liberate him from his worldly plight, and concludes with the assurance that his requests have been accepted by the Lord. The text is often considered to have been written towards the end of his life, where he, as a devotee, writes letters to Rāma, praying for deliverance from the terrors of the Kali age (Chaturvedi 1956, p. 54). The first 64 songs are invocatory hymns to different deities, and we are gradually led towards the inner court of Rāma through praises sung to Gaṇeśa (1), Sūrya (2), Śiva (3–14), Umā (15–16), Hanumān (25–36), Lakṣmaṇa (37), Sītā (41–42), and finally to Rāma (43–64). The regal setup is highlighted by Pathak (1964, pp. 18–20) who argues that just as in the case of sending a message to a royal court, first, one has to meet with the court authorities, the *Vinaypatrikā* too begins with praises of various deities such as Gaṇeśa, Sūrya, Hanumān, and Sītā before extolling the glories of Rāma. As the songs unfold, Tulsīdās repeatedly presents various aspects of his agonised existence which is marked by immersion in sensual pleasures, and appeals to the Lord to extricate him from the terrifying ocean of the world.

The two moments—the individual’s fallen (*patita*) condition and the appeal to divine help—are deeply interrelated across the songs. As Pathak (1964, p. 29) notes, they are pervaded by Tulsīdās’s sense of destitution and his deep trust in the mercy of the Lord. On the one hand, Tulsīdās exhorts the dull mind to awaken in the night of the world, and know that worldly goods are as transient as a flash of lightning among the clouds. Even in dreams, the mind suffers from the ills of existence, as it can feel that it is sinking in the waters of a mirage or is bitten by a snake that is in truth a rope (VP 73, 153). Tulsīdās laments that his own birth has gone in vain, because even with the body which is difficult to obtain (*duralabh*), he has not worshipped Rāma with thought, word, and deed. He has spent his childhood, youth, and middle age immersed in worldly delights, without serving the servants of Rāma and his right-minded saints (*sādhū*). Thus, he cries out in despair: ‘Beat, beat your head in regret, wring your hands, there is no friend to help in this insufferable fire ...’ (VP 83, 165–66). Because the spiritual self has moved away from Hari, it regards the body as its home and under the influence of *māyā*, it has forgotten its true form (*svarūpa*); because of this delusion (*bhrama*), it is afflicted with great suffering (VP 136, 234–37). Against the backdrop of this litany of empirical ills, a characteristic way of highlighting the Lord’s transcendental purity in the *Vinaypatrikā* is to list the salvific virtues of the divine name. The mind should repeat the name of Rāma, for it is the only ship that takes individuals across the terrible (*ghora*) ocean of existence; all other spiritual means such as yoga, restraint, and *samādhi* are seized by the disease of the dark age (*kali-roga*). The transient world is but a flowery garden in the sky (*nabha-vāṭikā*), and we should not

be deceived by its columns of smoke. Those who leave the name of Rāma and put their trust elsewhere are, in fact, like fools who leave food at their own table and go begging for scraps from others (VP 66, 144). The name is a great jewel, a wish-fulfilling tree which grants the four fruits of human existence, and is the basis (*ādhāra*) of Tulsīdās's life (VP 67, 145–46). Further, the name is provision for the destitute (*nisambala*), companion (*sakhā*) for the helpless, father and mother for the hungry, support for the supportless (*nirādhāra*), the bridge across the ocean of existence, and the cause of the essence of joy. For purifying the fallen (*patita pāvana*), there is nothing like the name of Rāma (VP 69, 148).

Working with these two interrelated themes—human desolation and divine mercifulness—Tulsīdās often magnifies the depths of his own wretchedness by characteristically calling himself the greatest or the highest of the fallen and highlights Rāma's super-eminent greatness of being the crest-jewel of the generous (*udāra cūḍāmani*) (VP 185, 313). Highlighting his utter destitution, Tulsīdās says that he does not have the devotion which would please Rāma; he does not, in addition, have the karma, the nature, the time, a master, a place, wealth, a beautiful body, a right mind, or a right age (VP 182, 308). Therefore, he does not even know how to tell Rāma his petition (*binatī*), for seeing his countless sins, he stands in front of Rāma whose refuge (*saran*) he seeks and instead hangs his head (VP 208, 349). Tulsīdās remarks, with a rhetorical flourish, that the Lord of death could not number Tulsīdās's sins and wickedness even after he had given up all other work and set himself to this task alone (VP 95, 182). As truly the greatest of the wretched, Tulsīdās seeks to cultivate a devotional servitude towards his Lord, by highlighting the misery of becoming enslaved to worldly masters. He has sold to others the name of Rāma for a pittance, and has thus become their slave (*cero*) (VP 143, 256–57). He says that if he were not ashamed of offering service (*cerāī*) to Rāma, he would not have been sold from one hand to another (VP 151, 269–70). Yet, he yearns in every way to become a servant (*cero*) of Rāma, even as everywhere, in the age of Kali, time, karma and sensual objects surround him, and seek to purchase him (VP 146, 262). He has come to Raghunātha for refuge (*sarana*), terrified by the fears of existence, and he wishes to remain lying at the palace door (VP 91, 174–75).

A key theme in the *Vinaypatrikā*, then, is the seeking of refuge at the feet of the Lord on the part of devotees who completely lack the means through which they might gain the favour of the Lord. Appealing to Rāma to redeem him from his worldly subjugation, Tulsīdās seeks a devotional subservience to the Lord, for there is, he says, none who is as generous and merciful towards the wretched as Rāma (*dīna ko dayālu dānī*). The beggars who have begged from Rāma have never had to beg again; thus hearing of Rāma's nature, character, and good fame, Tulsīdās has come to beg, and he pleads with the compassionate Rāma to say once, 'Tulsi Das is mine!' (VP 78, 160). He has none other than Rāma to whom to appeal, for he knows that Rāma is the friend of the poor, a friend to the servant, and naturally gracious (*sahaj choh*) to the afflicted and the orphan (VP 273, 446). Rāma is the purifier of the fallen (*patita-pāvan*), the protector of the humble (*pranata-pāla*), and the refuge of those without refuge (*asaran-saran*) (VP 210, 352). He does not know any spiritual means or attainments, or the instructions of the Vedas, or prayers, or austerities, and he has not gained control of mind or breath. Yet, he has supreme trust (*bharos*) in the treasury of compassion, Rāma, who will banish the terrible afflictions of the world (VP 197, 329–30). The Lord demolishes the afflictions of the worshipper (*pranātārata-bhanjana*) and gladdens his servants, and his

name is the adamantine cage for the seeker of refuge (*saranāgata*). Tulsīdās thus appeals to the Lord to make him the Lord's slave and let him be sold without a price (*mola*) (VP 153, 273). He repeatedly implores Rāma, his benefactor, the ocean of compassion, not to turn him away, for he has no other refuge in the world:

‘Where else should I go leaving your feet?  
Who else in the world is named purifier of the fallen? and to whom else are the  
wretched so dear?  
Who else is the god who for the sake of his fame resolutely delivers the wretched  
(*haṭhi haṭhi adhama udhāre*)?’ (VP 101, 192).

The vast metaphysical gulf between devotee and deity is thus clearly delineated: while Tulsīdās is a rebel against his master, his master is yet his servant's benefactor: ‘Who is greater (*baṛo*) than Rāma, and who is smaller (*choṭo*) than I am? Who is more excellent (*kharo*) than Rāma, and who is more wretched (*khoto*) than I am?’ (VP 72, 152). Tulsīdās is subject to *māyā*, and Rāma is the Lord of *māyā*; he is a beggar, and Rāma is a great alms-giver (*sudātā*) (VP 177, 302–03). Tulsīdās outlines an extensive series of contrasts between himself and his Lord in one song:

‘You are merciful, I am poor (*dīna*), you are bountiful, I am a beggar,  
I am a famous sinner (*pātakī*), you drive away masses of sins.  
You are the master of the masterless, and who is more masterless than I?  
There is none as afflicted as I am, and none like you who takes away  
afflictions.  
You are Brahma, and I am a soul (*jīva*), you are Lord (*ṭhākura*), and I am your  
servant  
You are father, mother, teacher, friend, and my benefactor in every way.  
Between you and me are many bonds (*nāte*), take whichever pleases you!  
So that Tulsī, by any means, O compassionate, can gain the shelter of your feet  
(*carana-sarana*)’ (VP 79, 161–62).

The Lord's gracious nature is highlighted even more dramatically when Tulsīdās claims that the Lord loves his servants so deeply that by ‘forgetting his lordship (*prabhutā*)’, he becomes subservient (*bas*) to them (VP 98, 185). In several poems, it is not so much the Lord's transcendental sovereignty that is highlighted as his accessible love, through which, in fact, he becomes subject to his own devotees. Tulsīdās writes that there is none other so worthy to ask for refuge (*sarana*) as Raghupati, for through his inborn nature he remains in the control of his servants (*sahaja subhāu sevaka bas*) and loves without reason to those who bow to him (*pranata par prīti akāran*). He regards the small virtues of his slave as equivalent to the mountain Sumera, and he forgets the ten million vices (*avagun*) which he sees in them (VP 206, 345–46). He made various individuals such as the bird, the bears, and the monkeys more praiseworthy than even himself (*āpu te vandita bare*), and yet when he recalled their services (*sevā*) to him, he contracted inwardly with modesty, as it were (VP 135, 231–32). He knows fully well the ways of love, such is the eulogy that the Vedas sing. He dispels the greatness (*baṛāi*)

of the great and the smallness (*choṭāī*) of the small, thus he performed the funeral of the vulture (VP 183, 309–10). The Lord who is inaccessible to the minds of the sages is yet said to be as accessible (*sugam*) as mother and father to devotees. He is an ocean of compassion, intrinsically a friend (*sahaj sakhā*) and a lover (*sanehī*) to devotees (VP 71, 151). Rāma is naturally a lover (*sahaja sanehī*) (VP 190, 320–21) and he is, indeed, the only true lover (*sanehī*) (VP 191, 322), and our human birth is futile if we have not cultivated affection (*anurāga*) for Rāma (VP 194, 326–27).

However, precisely because Rāma, the benefactor of the wretched (*dīna-hitakārī*), who assists others for no reason, has given protection to numerous individuals such as Vibhīṣaṇa and the monkeys, Tulsīdās laments that Rāma has forgotten to show mercy on him, who is caught by the sins of the age of Kali (VP 166, 289–90). Tulsīdās says that day and night, he keeps on looking at the pathway of the compassion of Rāma, who is merciful to the wretched (*dīnadayālu*), not knowing when it will arrive (VP 221, 370–71). More actively, Tulsīdās often appeals to Rāma to have regard for his own vows (*karahu lāja nija pana kī*) of delivering the fallen (VP 90, 173–74). There is none whom the Lord has not protected to keep the good fame of his name as the deliverer of the fallen. Therefore, pointing out to Rāma that he has protected numerous individuals such as Ajāmila and the elephant, he objects: ‘I ask in what deeds am I lesser than any of them, O king, jewel of the line of Raghu?’ (VP 144, 258). He does not know why the Lord has abandoned him as if he were a stranger, for if the Lord were to accept only the supremely pure saints with gentle hearts, he would not have saved various other sinners. Thus he exclaims: ‘Though, Lord, this impertinence (*dhihāī*) of mine is not proper; Yet Tulsī Dās, seeing your cruelty (*niṭhūrāī*), is weakened day and night’ (VP 112, 206). He declares that he has, in fact, taken a vow (*pan*) that he will lie at the door of Rāma and will not rise for the rest of his life until Rāma says to him, ‘You are mine’. If Rāma hesitates to make such a statement in public, because Tulsīdās is full of sins, Rāma should at least make Tulsīdās his own in his mind (VP 267, 438–39).

At various places in the *Vinaypatrikā*, Tulsīdās’s complaints are shaped by such notes of sharp exasperation at the seemingly erratic ways of his Lord who, the *Purāṇas* tell us, has rescued numerous beings, and who is yet seemingly apathetic to the Tulsīdās who patiently waits for deliverance. At one place, he urges the Lord not to stoop to the fallible ways of human beings:

‘Where shall I go to? And to whom shall I speak? – for I have no other resort.  
Your servant wastes away his life waiting only at your door.  
If I have fallen away, Lord, this is because of my afflictions,  
O abode of compassion, how does it become you if you behave as I do?’ (VP 149, 266).

Another mode in which Tulsīdās seeks to break through the Lord’s seeming indifference is by indicating to him that if he indeed did not deliver Tulsīdās from worldly misery, his fame, declared by the Vedas, would be negated:

‘Knowing me in your heart to be a crown-jewel of wicked servants, lacking in all means,



With a crooked mind, and impure, if you should be afraid,  
Says Dās Tulsī, Lord, how will you spread  
Your glories and your spotless fame, known to the Vedas?’ (VP 211, 353–54).

Even more forcefully, Tulsīdās challenges, in another song, Rāma to a contest out of which, he says, only one of them will emerge victorious:

‘Either reform me completely and keep me, or put an end to this wretch,  
Think of the two alternatives, I will not entreat you further.  
Tulsī speaks the truth, and underlines it again and again,  
If you delay, I will sink the boat of the glory of your name’ (VP 258, 424–25).

Notwithstanding these agonistic notes, the *Vinaypatrikā* ends on a note of resolution—it would seem that Rāma does live up to his name of delivering sinners. Tulsīdās requests Rāma to read his *Vinaypatrikā*, which he has written after examining his heart and place it before his courtiers (VP 277, 452–53). Lakṣmaṇa reports to Rāma that in the age of Kali there is a servant with faith and love (*paratūti-prīti*) for the name of Rāma, and the entire assembly concurs. Rāma smiles, and says, ‘True, I too have received this information’. Pleased, Tulsīdās bowed his head; his petition was accepted (VP 279: 456).

## Sūrdās Duels with Kṛṣṇa

The theme of a struggle between the wretched devotee and the transcendently perfect deity is articulated even more intensely in certain respects in the *Sūrsāgar* of Sūrdās. Several of Tulsīdās’s motifs resonate across the Braj-bhāṣā compositions of the *Sūrsāgar*, especially in the songs in the category of petitionary songs (*vinaya*)—the depths of human wretchedness, the afflictions of *saṁsāra*, and the passionate appeals to the Lord who is the ‘purifier of the fallen’. We find in Sūrdās too the rhetorical magnification by Tulsīdās of his own depravity, which is so utter that even the Lord of the underworld cannot comprehend its extension; the theme of enslavement to worldly rulers; and the lament at having lost the most precious treasure, the Lord, who is yet supremely merciful to the fallen.

Sūrdās says that he has wasted away his days without bringing the Lord to mind (*hari-sumiran*). He has spent his time beautifying his body, cleaning his clothes, and lording it over others. Such is the way of the wretched (*adham*)—they fill their belly and go off to sleep (NPS 52; Vol 1, 18). He laments that he has, in fact, wasted several lifetimes in a state of delusion (*janam bahut baurāyau*). Averse to the Lord, he has rejected his lotus feet, and he has not found any peace. He has received numerous forms of births, and driven by desire, anger, pride, greed, and delusion, he has committed great sins (*agha bhāre*) (NPS 27; Vol 1, 9–10). He has wandered through the world without discrimination (*bibek*), and thus he is entangled in knots of *māyā* so firm that he cannot break through them. He is left hanging without devotion to the Lord or the company of the good (NPS 292; Vol 1, 96–97). He is sold into the hands of *māyā*, and he is under the power of another (*parabas*), like an animal bound with a rope (NPS 47; Vol 1, 17). He

has been duped in delusion after delusion, and immersed in worldly pleasures, he has lost the Hari diamond that was in his own home (NPS 326; Vol 1, 108). He is ashamed even of sending a prayer (*binatī*) to the Lord; from toe to head, his entire body is a vessel of sin (*pāp*). He cannot see a sinner greater than him; he is, in fact, the crown of sinners. Even hell quakes in fear on hearing his name, and Yama, the Lord of death, turned his back on Sūrdās. Those whom the Lord has delivered were insignificant sinners; if the Lord were to deliver Sūrdās, the Lord's true fame would become proclaimed in the worlds (NPS 96; Vol 1, 30–31). He has even plunged himself several times into the wells in the city of death, till the agents of death became weary of pulling him out. This time, however, he will remain waiting at the Lord's door; the Lord who is the ocean of mercy can rage as much as he will, but Sūrdās will not leave the door even if the Lord throws him away (NPS 106; Vol 1, 34). He is the greatest of the fallen (*patitani-patites*)—he rules over the kingdom of great delusion (*mahāmoh*), he sits on the throne of wanting and under the canopy of pride, desire and anger are his ministers, egoism is his doorkeeper, and wicked intention is his messenger (NPS 141; Vol 1, 46).

Highlighting his wretchedness, he thus appeals to Kṛṣṇa for deliverance:

‘Lord, do not consider my virtues and my vices  
 Look at the shame of the one who has sought refuge at your feet,  
 And take away my fear of death.  
 I have done no yoga, sacrifice, prayer, or austerities,  
 I have not chanted the pure Vedas,  
 Like a dog greedy for leftovers, I have not fixed my mind on anything else.  
 As I have roamed through the torments of numerous births, I have earned the  
 same –  
 Desire, anger, pride, and greed have seized me, and I have fed on the sense's great  
 poisons.  
 If the mountain god were to mix ink with the ocean, take the tree of the gods in  
 his hand,  
 And write out my offences (*doṣa*) all over the earth,  
 Lord, they would still not be fully counted ...  
 You are omniscient, you can accomplish everything, you are the shelter of those  
 without shelter (*asaran saran*), Murāri.  
 Sūr sinks into the ocean of delusion – stretch out your arm to me’ (NPS 111; Vol  
 1, 36).

Sūrdās highlights in various ways the Lord's great concern for his devotees, to the extent that he becomes subservient to their love. Some of Tulsīdās's stylistic devices appear here as well: the Lord's mercy is intrinsic to the divine nature and does not follow the ways of worldly transactions. Sūrdās writes that there is no friend (*mīta*) like Hari who rushes to the help of those who remember him in times of distress (NPS 10; Vol 1, 10). There is no other Lord (*thākur*) who, enduring suffering for the sake of his people, seeks their welfare (*janakāran dukh sahi, bhalau manāvai*) (NPS 122; Vol 1, 40). By nature, he is easily accessible, and he comes under the power of their recollection (*subhāv-sulabh samiran bas*). He protected elephants, cowherd men and cowherd women, and cows; he killed numerous demons; and he drank the forest fire.



He is all-knowing and a treasure of mercy (*kṛpānidhi*), and his heart is soft with compassion (*karuṇā-mṛdul hiyau*); there is no one else to go to for shelter (*saran*) (NPS 121; Vol 1, 40). The greatness of the Lord lies in the fact that though he is the father of the world, the ruler of the world, and the guru of the world he bears the insolence of his own devotees (*nij bhaktani sahat dhiḥāi*). He helps people without seeking anything in return (*binu badlain upakār karat hain*), and he makes friends with others without any self-interest in mind (*svārath binā karat mītrāi*) (NPS 3; Vol 1, 1). He regards the straw-like virtues of his people to be as heavy as the mountain Meru, and their ocean of vices to be as minute as a drop of water. The compassionate one is afflicted with the pain of separation from his devotees (*bhakta-birah-kātar*), and he goes walking after them (NPS 8; Vol 1, 3). Vibhīṣaṇa was simply a demon, and yet Hari smilingly raised him to the status of king. The Lord made Sudāmā, who was greatly poor, in fact equal to himself (*āp samān karai*) (NPS 35; Vol 1, 12). The Lord makes whatever arrangements are necessary for the happiness of his servants—food when they are hungry, water when they are thirsty, and clothes for their bodies. The Lord remains involved with his devotees in the manner of a cow which remains anxious for its calf while it is grazing away from its home (NPS 9; Vol 1, 3–4). The Lord has protected numerous people in distress such as the daughter of Drupada by demolishing the pride of Duryodhana, Prahlaḍa from his demon father, and the people of Braj against the king of the gods. By singing praises to the Lord, one receives refuge at his feet, and one is delivered (*saran gaye ubarai*) (NPS 37; Vol 1, 13).

Thus, highlighting the universality of the Lord's outreach, Sūrdās strikingly remarks that the Lord is known to all not as the 'purifier of the devotees' (*bhakta-pāvan*) but as the 'purifier of the fallen'. Ajāmila, in great distress, remembered his son and took his name, 'Nārāyaṇa', and for this reason, he was delivered by the Lord. The Lord has appeared on earth for delivering the earth from its burden (*bhū-bhar-haran pragaṭ tum bhūtal*); thus, the company of the holy people (*sant-samāi*) sing. Therefore, if the Lord were to show his favour to Sūrdās, the Lord would not suffer any diminishment (*na kachu ghaṭai tumhārau*) in the process (NPS 215; Vol 1, 70–71). Sūrdās has not followed *dharma* or performed austerities or vows, and he is hesitant to speak to the Lord. Thinking of his ill deeds, he is filled with fear. He has only one strength and foundation—the fame of the Lord as the purifier of the fallen is declared by the Vedas (NPS 110; Vol 1, 36). And yet the complaint surfaces: the Lord has, in fact, forgotten Sūrdās who is completely wretched (*dīn*), base (*hīn*), and full of offences (NPS 158; Vol 1, 52). Noting that 'the purifier of the fallen' (*patita-pāvan*), 'the friend of the poor' (*dīna-bandhu*), and 'the guardian of those without protectors' (*anāthani ke nāth*) are the phrases with which the scriptures praise the Lord he claims that there is none who is more greatly fallen than himself, none who is more without a protector, more lowly, and more wretched (*anāth-hīna-dīna*) (NPS 182; Vol 1, 59). Yet the Lord who melts with compassion on seeing the distress of the devotees seems to have forgotten Sūrdās:

'Mādhav rescued the elephant from the jaws of the crocodile.

He expressed his form that the Vedas declare to be beyond thought and speech.

Śiva and Brahmā stood watching, as he suffered greatly.

Without the prospect of payment in return, nobody helps others. They did not rush to his aid.

The moment he brought to mind the Jewel of Thought,  
 The compassionate one (*karuṇāmay*), who was overcome with compassion, took  
 discus in his hand  
 And leapt up from his vehicle, Garuḍ.  
 We hear the great fame of the Lord – he never delays for the sake of his own  
 devotees.  
 Sūr wonders: for what fault of mine has the Lord forgotten me on this occasion?’  
 (NPS 430; Vol 1, 170–71).

Therefore Sūrdās seeks to remind Kṛṣṇa, the one who delivers the fallen, that he demonstrates his lordship over the world precisely by speedily aiding the distressed devotees:

‘What is it that I have not done? Consider all my actions.  
 How would you live up to your name as the purifier of the fallen?  
 Since I was born into the world, and received the name of a living being,  
 I have performed nothing other than evil deeds, and not once taken your name.  
 I have reviled the holy people, I am greedy for worldly tastes, I am deceitful, and  
 I have rejected my guru,  
 I have committed all the offences that there are in the world.  
 By abandoning you, Lord, I have wandered from door to door  
 If the blind were to lead the blind, why would they not fall into a ditch?  
 You are attracted to those servants who are virtuous and pure,  
 But it is by giving shelter to the wretched that the Lord establishes his lordship  
 (*prabhuṭā*).  
 O lotus-eyed, you are compassionate, and you are the knower of our hearts,  
 What prayer (*binātī*) can Sūr offer – who is cruel, crooked, and craving?’ (NPS  
 124; Vol 1, 41).

Elsewhere, however, Sūrdās adopts a more confrontational mode, and says that he and the Lord are engaged in a competition (*hor*). There is no wickedness in the world which he has not committed, whereas the Lord has declared with stubbornness (*jak*) that he is the cause of the deliverance of a mass of the wretched (*adham-samūh*). As the Lord wishes to deliver him, he will have to struggle arduously for hours, and as the Lord perspires in the effort, he will wonder why he had taken up the task (NPS 130; Vol 1, 43). At another place, Sūrdās forcefully demands from the Lord that either he should accept defeat and sit down, or he should live up to his name as the purified of the fallen (*kai prabhu hāri māni kai baiṭho, kai karau birad sahī*) (NPS 137; Vol 1, 45). He claims in another song that it is precisely by delivering Sūrdās that the Lord’s fame will be truly established. If the Lord would deliver him, seeing that the name of the Lord is easily accessible, people will gather from various places, and the Lord will have to remain engaged with them, day and night. Sūrdās would have spread his fame throughout the world: ‘Sūrdās says: Look, Lord, I have made you great’ (*sūrdās prabhu samujhi dekhiyai mein bar tohin kar dīnhau*) (NPS 191; Vol 1, 62–63).

While Sūrdās interweaves in this manner elements of humble self-censure with notes of indignant protest, the overall significance of these lamentations of *vinaya* has often

been debated in the wider Vallabha tradition, which regards Sūrdās as a disciple of the Vaiṣṇava teacher (*ācārya*), Vallabha. Describing the *Sūrsāgar* as a ‘complex, disparate organism’ that developed across the centuries, Hawley (2016, p. 11) has identified a core, which he calls the early *Sūrsāgar*, comprising poems which were in circulation in the poet’s century. While the latter additions, Hawley (1984, p. 63) argues, ‘could not remove the pithy ironies, the artful shifts of perspective, or the striking expressions that were the hallmark of the *Sūr Sāgar* in its earlier form’, they could yet ‘surround them with more discursive, placid verse intended to bring out the happy, overarching logic that no reader should forget in encountering compositions that often seemed so provocative at first’. For instance, while Sūrdās’s poems on the child Kṛṣṇa, often regarded as the distinctive feature of his poetry, do appear in the early manuscripts of the *Sūrsāgar*, the chief voice is *viraha* in these poems. Again, the provocative dimensions of Sūrdās’s poetry are especially clear in the poems in the early *vinaya* collections where Sūrdās ‘stages a contest, full of bitterness, complaint, and irony, trying to shame Hari not only with his helplessness but also with his shamelessness in boasting of his sins’ (Hawley 1984, pp. 154–155).

From around four hundred poems which circulated in Sūrdās’s name by the end of the sixteenth century, the number rose to around ten thousand by the nineteenth century. Moreover, from around 1800 CE, the manuscripts of the *Sūrsāgar* sought to situate the poems within the Vallabha canon of scriptural materials, by fitting them into the twelve sections of the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa*. The Vallabha tradition’s hagiographical accounts of Sūrdās present him as one of the principal disciples of Vallabha, and his son, Viṭṭhalnātha. These accounts—the *Caurāsī Vaiṣṇavan kī Vārtā*, attributed to Gokulnāth and the commentary by his nephew, Harirāy—were possibly stimulated by the concern to make sense of the genre of petitionary songs (*vinaya*), which affirm the distance between the devotee and the Lord, while the Vallabha tradition itself highlights the gracious presence of the Lord in the world. The songs could then be explained as his ‘grovellings’ which he had composed before meeting Vallabha and being inducted by the Vaiṣṇava *ācārya* into the path of Kṛṣṇa’s grace (Hawley 2016, p. 15). The sense of theological unease over the presence of the *vinaya* mode of poems is often articulated in Hindi writings on Sūrdās where a clear distinction is posited between Sūrdās’s compositions before and after he is said to have met Vallabha. For instance, Sharma (1955, p. 117) argues that before meeting Vallabha, Sūrdās mostly composed songs in the genre of *vinaya* and the sentiment of *dāsya* towards his Lord. Sharma (1980, p. 6) too divides Sūrdās’s output, on the basis of the *Caurāsī Vaiṣṇavan kī Vārtā*, into two distinct phases—his lamentations in the genre of *vinaya* before he met Vallabha and his songs of the *līlā* of Hari after he met Vallabha. Sharma (1958, p. 96) argues that in the *puṣṭi-mārga* of Vallabha, the Lord’s grace is the cause of all worldly and spiritual fulfilment, and through immersion in the Lord’s *līlā*, the connection of the devotees to the Lord is established even in separation (*viyog mein bhi*).

## Mādhavadeva Appeals to Kṛṣṇa

The *Sūrsāgar* is a multi-layered collection of poems which marvel at Kṛṣṇa’s childhood sports; sing of the painful separation of the cowherd women from their divine beloved, and, as we have seen, highlight the wretched condition of the devotees as they wait for

the Lord. Several of these themes appear also in the songs (*bargīts*) of Mādhavadeva, such as the notion of the world as evanescent, the devotee's confession of sins, the sense of wonder at the descent of the divine reality for assisting the devotees, and the pain of separation experienced by the cowherd women (Neog 1977, pp. 18–19). The *bargīts*, in particular, which are shaped by the themes of petition (*vinaya*) and prayer (*prārthanā*) express the devotee's sense of one's own wretchedness (*dainya-bhāva*) and self-surrender at the feet of the Lord (Prasad 1981, pp. 137–72). They recur throughout the verses of the *Nāmghoṣā* of Mādhavadeva, for whom the way of returning to the Lord is through complete submission to the Lord. As Neog (1977, p. 1) indicates, for Mādhavadeva and his guru Śaṅkaradeva, the 'attitude of the votary is to look upon Kṛṣṇa ... as the master demanding love and veneration of the devotee as of a servant'. We learn little about Mādhavadeva's life from his own writings, for he usually refers to himself with descriptions such as 'wretched' (*dīna*) and 'servant' (*dāsa*). A distinctive feature of these writings, which is often highlighted in the contemporary literature, is the absence of the amorous sentiment of *śṛṅgāra*, which saturates the poetry of various figures associated with Bengal Vaiṣṇavism. Thus, Hazarika (1987, p. 59) notes that in the *bargīts* of Mādhavadeva, we find not the love-sports of the adolescent Kṛṣṇa but his mischievous thievery as a child.

The roughly one thousand verses in the *Nāmghoṣā* are divided into sections such as worship (*bhajana*), instruction (*upadeśa*), self-censure (*nindā*), prayer (*prārthanā*), and refuge (*śaraṇa*). As these headings indicate, Mādhavadeva alternates between issuing sharp rebukes to himself for his apathy towards Kṛṣṇa and pleading with Kṛṣṇa to deliver him from the world. Mādhavadeva says that his mind has been bewitched by *māyā*, because he has turned away from the Lord. He appeals to the Lord to be merciful to him so that he may always remain worshipping the feet of the Lord (*N* 67, 615).

'You are the most beloved *ātmā*

Yet I do not worship you – so vile (*adhama*) I am' (*N* 977, 974).

'You are the dear Self (*priya ātmā*), you are the supreme Lord (*parama devatā*)

We have become averse (*vimukha*) to you

Therefore your *māyā* has deluded us

And plunged us into the sufferings of the world' (*N* 379, 690).

'I bow to you Nārāyaṇa again and again, be favourable unto me, Hari

Dispel *māyā*,

Manifest your glory (*mahimā*)

And rescue us (*jīvaka kariyo paritrāṇa*)' (*N* 68, 615).

He is utterly without any protector (*parama anātha*), and thus throwing himself at the feet of the Lord, he seeks the grace of devotion to the Lord (*bhakti-prasāda*) (*N* 63, 614). The cultivation of one's loving servitude to the Lord is emphasised in various verses; the supreme God, Kṛṣṇa, cannot be obtained through austerities, prayers, sacrifices, yoga, and gifts unless one takes on one's own head the dust from the feet of single-minded devotees (*ekānta bhakta*)

(N 38, 607). Mādhavadeva prays to the feet of the Lord, while holding straw in his teeth (*dante tṛṇa dhari*), that his mind remains naturally (*svabhāve*) immersed in the Lord's name (N 324, 677).

‘O life-friend Kṛṣṇa, O Hari, the ocean of compassion,  
Look at me with eyes of mercy (*kṛpā*),  
O lord, let my seeking refuge at your feet become a spontaneous desire (*sahaj*  
*bāsanā*)  
Let my pride (*ahaṅkāra*) dissolve’ (N 62, 614).

‘Again and again, having received a human body, I have abandoned you  
O friend of the poor, Dāmodara,  
O Hari, I have moved through innumerable worlds  
O friend of the poor (*dīnabandhu*), many a times I have traversed birth and death.  
This time, o Lord of mercy, I have become your servant (*kiṅkara*)  
O friend of the poor, Dāmodara,  
O Hari, may my delight (*rati*) in you remain steady.  
O my life-friend, I bow to your feet’ (N 759, 763–64).

‘I hold on to your feet, and I beseech you  
O Yadupati, do not abandon me. I am without a protector (*anātha*)’ (N 799, 771).

‘Glory be to the merciful Lord Yadupati,  
I pray for the priceless devotion to your feet’ (N 534, 713).

The Lord's ownership of the devotee, his servant, is accentuated in verses where Mādhavadeva regards himself as worthless except in relation to his master and laments with vocabularies that echo those of Tulsīdās that he has ‘rebelliously’ abandoned his master's feet:

‘Make me your servant, Hari, and buy me, buy me (*muka kinā kinā*)!  
I desire no other wealth than the wealth (*dhana*) of your Name’ (N 541, 713).

‘By not acknowledging you to be the supreme Lord, O Hari  
We have, in great pride (*ahaṅkāra*), rebelled against you (*droha ācarilo*).  
I seek refuge at your feet, O Hari  
Forgive the offence (*doṣa*) of this rebel, O Lord’ (N 811, 773).

A motif common to Tulsīdās and Sūrdās appears as Mādhavadeva claims that he is, in fact, the highest limit (*sīmā*) of all the sinners (*pāpī*) in the world. So he prays to the Lord of the fallen to place him on the Lord's feet and display the glory of the Lord's name (N 66, 615).

‘I hold your feet and beg humbly not to leave me this time,  
You are the purifier of the fallen, Lord Nārāyaṇa,  
There is none equal to you’ (N 310, 674).

‘O merciful Lord, O ocean of mercy (*karuṇāsindhu*)  
We are not fit to be vessels (*pātra*) of your mercy  
Yet you are the friend of the wretched (*dīnabandhu*)’ (N 822, 775).

‘Lord Rāma-Kṛṣṇa, you are the purifier of the fallen (*patita pāvana*), you are the  
ocean of compassion (*kṛpā sindhu*)  
O friend of the wretched, do not abandon us who are fallen.  
O Hari, my life, O Murāri,  
You are the Lord of ones without shelter (*anāthara nātha*), you take away the fear  
of the devotees’ (N 547–548; 714).

A crucial theme in the *Nāmghoṣā* is that the essence (*sāra*) of the teachings of all the scriptures is that chanting the names of Rāma, Kṛṣṇa, and Hari is the highest *dharma* (N 23, 602–603). Knowing that life is momentary (*kṣaṇika*), and the sufferings of the world are terrible (*durghora*), we should take the name of the Lord (N 737–738, 759). The name of Hari is the great medicine (*auśadha*) in the ailment of the terrible world (N 50, 611). The highest *dharma* is singing about the birth and the actions of the Lord Mādhava, whose glory is not known even to the Vedas (N 78, 618). There is no need to read diverse scriptures or visit various pilgrimages: for traversing *saṃsāra* one needs to loudly chant the name ‘Govinda’ (N 606, 725). Because the *rasa* of singing about the Lord is supremely sweet (*sumadhura*) and supremely auspicious (*maṅgala*), the great devotees renounce even liberation (*mukutiku*) and go about singing the glories of the Lord (N 79, 618). By singing of the Lord, one receives the same fruits as one could get from pilgrimages, sacrifices, and donations (N 85, 620).

Thus, Mādhavadeva writes that the Lord is the friend of the devotees and the ocean of compassion, and his refuge (*gati*) lies at the Lord’s feet (N 64, 615). Those who take refuge (*śaraṇa*) at the feet of the Lord with purity of heart and regard him as their friend (*suhrda*) overcome, through the Lord’s grace (*prasāda*), all impediments, sing the glories of the Lord and dance (N 6, 597). The Lord is the supreme person, the supreme cause (*parama kāraṇa*), ever blissful (*sadānanda*), ever auspicious, eternal truth, inscrutable (*acintya*), and infinite (N 88, 621). And yet the Lord, whom even the Vedas do not know of, is subservient to the recitation (*kīrtana*) of his own names (N 83, 619). The Lord of all the gods, Hari is unable to leave the heart of the devotee who sings his names and glories (N 82, 619). The Lord who is not easily obtainable (*durlabha*) even by the gods can be made subservient (*baśya*) only by devotion: this is the mystery contained in all the scriptures (N 221, 654). The Lord is the one who loves his devotees (*bhakata batsala*), the friend of his devotees (*bhakata bandhu*), the joy of his devotees, and the dispeller of the fear of his devotees (N 783, 768).

The trope that we have observed in Tulsīdās and Sūrdās appears here as well: between the devotee and the deity is a metaphysical gulf, but on the grounds that the lordship of Kṛṣṇa is established precisely by delivering sinners Mādhavadeva appeals to the merciful Kṛṣṇa to assist him. He does not know any means of worshipping the feet of Govinda, and it is meet that Govinda has



mercy (*karuṇā*) on him so that he is able to worship the Lord always (N 323, 677).

‘There is no sinner like me in the three worlds,  
There is no dispeller of sins (*pāpahārī*) like you,  
Knowing this, Govinda, do unto me as is fit  
Such is my prayer at your feet’ (N 136, 633).

‘I do not know the rituals of invocation or immersion  
I do not know in the least worship (*pūjā*) and mantra,  
Thus, supreme Lord, I have become a servant at your feet  
And it is proper (*ucita*) that you deliver me’ (N 139, 634).

Occasionally, Mādhavadeva’s voice grows more combative, where he urges Kṛṣṇa to act positively to help him, the servant of Kṛṣṇa, through the afflictions of the world.

‘If I remain as a fallen one in the ocean of the world  
Why are you named as the ‘purifier of the fallen’?’ (N 536, 713).

‘Banamālī, buy me in exchange of the wealth of your name  
What kind of lordship (*thākūrāli*) is this of yours, that you do not take me as your servant (*dāsa*)?’ (N 540, 713).

‘You are the Lord of mercy (*dāyāra thākura*), how is it that you do not show me mercy?  
O Rāma, Kṛṣṇa, Nārāyaṇa, merciful to the wretched’ (N 795, 770).

‘O merciful (*dāyāśīla*) Lord, Dāmodara  
This is my plea at your feet:  
If you take me as your servant (*dāsa*), O Lord  
Tell me, O merciful, what loss is it to you (*tomāra ki haya hāni*)?  
O Yadupati, you are supremely merciful  
For what offence (*aparādha*) of mine do you abandon me, your servant?  
Even the scriptures declare, O Hari  
That those who take your name even unconsciously (*ajñānato*)  
You consider to be yours’ (N 801–802, 771).

‘To even the ignorant birds and beasts, you show your favour (*anugraha*), O Lord of mercy (*kṛpāmaya*).  
Knowing this I seek refuge at your feet, O Hari  
To abandon us is not becoming of you (*ucita naya*)’ (N 803, 771–72).

Finally, Mādhavadeva can even invite the Lord, on one occasion, to put his designation to a test:

‘Purifier of the fallen, Rāma Nārāyaṇa,  
Deliver me and keep me at your feet.

Let your name ‘purifier of the fallen’

Be tested through me (*nāmara parīkṣā karā*), who is fallen’ (N 313, 675).

## Conclusion

Our study of the devotional songs of three rough contemporaries, Tulsīdās, Sūrdās, and Mādhavadeva indicates a range of styles of devotional servitude, even though these are articulated in their distinctive modes through their wider bodies of songs. Their contestations with the Lord are shaped by different forms of enslavement and friendship, ranging from a mild petitionary reminder that the Lord’s duty is to deliver the fallen, through an extravagantly ironic boast that the poet is indeed the greatest of the fallen and waits to see if the Lord does live up to the scriptural descriptions, to a combative invitation to a duel from which only one antagonist will emerge successful. Our embattled poets alternately cajole, plead, and threaten, and occasionally challenge the Lord to an endgame. The enslavement to the divine feet that they seek does not negate their deep anguish that the Lord whom they seek remains inaccessible to their reach, and thus idioms of indignant protest, devotional subservience, and loving intimacy are deeply intertwined across their poetic oeuvres. Theologically speaking, they are grappling with the dialectic of the immanently accessible Lord who remains transcendentally sovereign to their worldly demands. The agony of a finite human soul trying to seize, possess, and contain the infinite Lord is articulated in some layers of medieval Vaiṣṇava poetry through the trope of *māna*, or love-in-anger, which Rādhā exhibits as she awaits Kṛṣṇa in her moments of separation (*viraha*). According to tradition, Paramānand was one of the eight poets installed by Vallabha, and some of his songs depict the Kṛṣṇa (*Śyāmsundar*) who gingerly approaches the Rādhā full of *māna*:

I’ll stay angry indeed, I’ll stay angry.  
When Śyāmsundar comes to the house,  
then I’ll speak angry words to him.  
If he tries to make up, I won’t do it;  
I’ll suffer the arrows of [the god of love] Kāmadeva.  
If Paramānand’s lord throws himself at my feet,  
I’ll still be stubborn. (Sanford 2008, p. 123)

Even more antagonistic, in certain respects, is the voice of the eighth century Tamil Saiva poet Cuntaramūrtti who depicts Śiva as the madman (*pittan*), and whose love of God is characterised not so much by servitude or filial love but by companionship where, according to Shulman (1990, p. 15), the capricious god and the ‘harsh devotee’, Cuntaramūrtti himself, are ‘temperamental twins, bonded together ... [in] a tempestuous relationship marked by constant struggle and frequent, bitter recrimination’. Some resonances of the angry love we have discerned in Tulsīdās, Sūrdās, and Mādhavadeva appear in Cuntaramūrtti’s vehement cry:

‘If I am now superfluous to you, just what do you think you’ll do? This is wholly inadequate. Look what you’ve done! If you don’t need my services any longer, why, then, did you enslave me by force?’ (1990, p.xxxiii).

These iconoclastic notes of ecstatic devotion occasionally appear in our three poets. While Tulsīdās’s Rāma is the supreme person who has descended to the world largely to subdue the wicked and rescue the fallen, Sūrdās’s Kṛṣṇa is also the supreme person who captivates the world through his *līlā* as a child (Kulkarni 1990, p. 73). A distinctive form of theological inversion which we encounter in Sūrdās’s poems is the portrayal of foster mother Yaśodā’s maternal concern for her child. (Dvivedi 1961, p. 167). She prays to the family deity (*kula devatā*) that her little son may live long (NPS 733; Vol 1, 300). On the other hand, as Yaśodā binds her child with a rope to a heavy stone and is about to hit him with a stick, a cowherd woman complains that such anger is unbecoming of a mother: the little boy shudders with fear, as he looks at her face, and frightened by the stick, his eyes have turned red (NPS 982; Vol 1, 381). Bringing together some of these inversions, Sūrdās notes that the same child who sucked out the life from the demoness sulks when his mother says that he has spilled the milk, who is scared of stepping into a darkened house walked into the mouth of the demon and emerged with the children and the calves, and who gets scared if he sees a cobra drawn on the door danced on the hood of the serpent Kālīya (NPS 1116; Vol 1, 433–34). Thus, Sūrdās often highlights aspects of Kṛṣṇa which are ‘crooked’ (*kuṭil*, *ṭeḍhā*, *bakra*), and his actions are characterised as ‘theft’ and ‘deception’ (*kapaṭ*, *dhūṭh*, *haṭh*). These reversals are highlighted in the contemporary *rās līlās* which are conducted in the region of Braj; they often incorporate the songs of the *Sūrsāgar*, and they emphasise the anti-structural dimensions of the transcendental divinity who communes with mere cowherds in a land where everything is turned ‘upside down’, and who even becomes sold into the hands of his devotees. The thievery of Kṛṣṇa, through which he captivates the hearts of his devotees and establishes a bond with them, is depicted as, in fact, the highest form of theft. Thus, Hawley (1983, pp. 269–70) argues that the *līlās* alternate between elements of Kṛṣṇa’s transcendental lordship and Kṛṣṇa’s lowly state as a human being, and this oscillation blurs ‘the distinction between the two levels, running together the human and the divine, conflating amusement and exaltation’.

While Tulsīdās does not characterise the deeds of Rāma in terms of ‘thievery’ and ‘deception’, several themes in the poems of Sūrdās recur, as we have seen, throughout his *vinaya* poems, such as the expressions of one’s wretchedness, the inquiry into one’s faults, self-censure, trust in the Lord, and the descriptions of the futility of worldly possessions (Maurya 1992, pp. 202–208). Tulsīdās’s *Rāmcaritmānas* presents Rāma as a cosmic lord of transcendental perfection, who vanquishes great demonic powers and who can never be subject to the vagaries of petty human emotions (Bryant 1978, pp. 16–17). Mādhavadeva too laments that he has been deluded by the power of ignorance (*avidyā*), urges dwellers of *saṁsāra* to take refuge at the feet of the world, and cautions those who have not taken the name of the Lord in the age of Kali that their lives are in vain. While in the poems we have discussed, the predominant note is the sentiment of servitude (*dāsyā-bhāva*), the proclaimed status of a servant is not only not devoid of intense love towards the master but also, on occasion, compatible with an attitude of exasperation at the master’s failure to live up to his name. Across Tulsīdās, Sūrdās, and Mādhavadeva, an acute realisation of the depths of one’s own worthlessness is

concurrent with a passionate appeal to the Lord who is declared to be the one who compassionately delivers the fallen. Thus, we hear Tulsīdās saying that his petition to Rāma is that he desires no liberation, intelligence, or wealth, other than that his selfless affection (*hetu-rahit anurāg*) for Rāma's feet grows day by day (VP 103, 194). The Lord Rāma too desires love alone (*eka prīti*), and if he is only called to mind, he is pleased. He is the friend of the afflicted (*ārata-jana-bandhu*), he gives all joys, he burns away all sorrows, and he dwells in all (VP 107, 200). Therefore, the highest gain in life is the pure love (*pāvana prema*) of the lotus feet of Rāma. If one takes the name of Rāma, all religious goals (*dharama*) are obtained easily (VP 131, 226). Thus, given this divine accessibility, our poets can throw down the gauntlet to their Lord, even to the point of occasionally taunting the Lord to demonstrate the truth of the scriptural claim of being the one who assists the afflicted. Reminding the Lord of the numerous beings he has delivered from *saṁsāra*, Sūrdās therefore complains:

‘Why do you keep on thinking in my case?

Send me away by cutting through the snares of sin, just as you released the elephant.

Tell me what remains to be done (*kaun karnī ghāṭī*) by me, I will shoulder this task’ (NPS 199; 65).

As Kumar (1965, p. 110) has argued, the combative note that Sūrdās strikes in the *vinaya* poems can be directed only towards someone who is considered as one's equal, and not as one's Lord. Thus, in addition to the notes of the expression of one's wretchedness (*dainya*), we also hear those of a certain irreverence (*akkharpan*), as Sūrdās speaks sharply to the Lord (Khandelwal 1970, p. 59). With Mādhavadeva too, while the theme of servitude pervades his songs, we also discern a ‘relation of natural love’ (*sahaj prītir samparka*) towards the Lord (Hazarika 1987, p. 35). We find the sentiment of *vātsalya* in his *bargits*, where he depicts Yaśodā's love for her child, and, according to Neog (1977, p. 9), in his evocations of *vātsalya* he ‘can be compared only to Sūrdās among north-Indian poets’. Another central theme in his works is the sense of wonder with which he contemplates how the Lord of Vaiṣṇava has become a cowherd who steals butter from the houses of the cowherd women.

Several of the themes we have discussed in this essay recur more widely across the rich textures of *bhakti* poetry. O'Connell (1980, pp. 125–26) has pointed out, in his study of the motifs of deliverance (*uddhāra*) in three ‘entreaty’ prayers of Narottama-dāsa (c. 1600 CE), that the poems highlight the wretched condition into which the supplicant has fallen, and appeal to Kṛṣṇa to compassionately deliver him from the cruel ocean of transmigratory existence (*saṁsāra*). A characteristic aspect of the prayers is the note of self-deprecation in which the poet acknowledges one's faults and lowly status (*adhama*) as an evil doer. He says that he has spent his life in vain (*bifale*), for even after having attained birth as a human being he has not worshipped Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa. For Tulsīdās, Sūrdās, and Mādhavadeva too, as we have seen, the infinite gulf between the devotee and the deity can be traversed only by the deity, for it is the merciful deity who, as the ‘purifier of the fallen’, reaches out from the realms of divine perfection to human wretchedness. Thus, the notion of the Lord as the deliverer of human beings from their *saṁsāric* ills acts as a theological focus that brings together

the divine sovereignty and the divine immanent presence in the world. As human beings who have strayed away from the Lord's presence, they have nothing to offer but their miserable state, but precisely this affliction gives them the assurance, and occasionally even the courage to claim, that the Lord will not fail them and will deliver them from the miseries of the world.

### Abbreviations

VP, Vinaypatrikā;

NPS, Nāgarīpracārīṇī  
Sabhā;

N, Nāmaghoṣā

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