

Haridasas of Karnatak

Guru Shreesh Vithal das: Life and works

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1. Life:

Kanakachala (Dist. Raichur) is one of the holy places associated with God Narsimha. In the middle of the eighteenth century Tammanna was the village accountant in this place. He was honoured and feared by the people. Blessed by Narasimha he had an issue in 1745. The resplendent child having all auspicious characters was named Narsimha. Tammanna led a disciplined life and the son followed his example. A pious child, he received both temporal and spiritual education from his father. In due course he succeeded to his father's profession. He did his job well and earned the respect of the people. He kept an open house; guests were welcomed and taken care of. Coaching in the traditional manner and religious discourses were continued. A lot of money was expended on religious functions and participants were generously rewarded. In fact he was a bit over-generous, but the perks of his profession enabled him to maintain the expenditure. Perhaps god's grace also backed him!

When he thus prospered God was making other plans—the time had come to give his life a more spiritual slant.

Once, rather over-enthusiastic, he spent government funds for a function. Misappropriation charges were brought against him and he was jailed. Though baffled he kept up his courage—and did not plead for mercy.

In the jail one early morning he dreamt a dream. In the dream God told him to give up all he had and follow him. How was this possible when he was not free? The answer was—He was the binder, the bound and the bond-freer! Narsimha was told to meet Jagannath das to achieve higher spiritual goals in life. The revelation thrilled him—he overflowed with devotion, danced for joy. He realised he had been in the dark so far. As Jagannath das says, “Tie Him up with bonds of devotion, He will free you from worldly ties, Forget Him, and you will be bound yourself”. When Vasudeva was ready to carry Krishna his chains fell off and the prison doors opened. It so happened in the case of Narsimha. Because of somebody's intervention he was let off with honour. He decided to turn away from worldly affairs and came to be known as Narsisimha das.

Then he started on his journey to Jagannath das—the author of Harikathamrutasara supposed to be the masterpiece in Haridas literature. Blessed by Vijayadas, he had received a forty-year lease of life from Gopaldas. Pandharpur Vithal had Himself given him the ankita. The das had been responsible for bringing many an errant person on the right path.

When Narsimhad as approached him he was received with filial love. Thenceforward the disciple felt he was in the presence of the divine. Religious discourses, meetings with the

saintly, his guru's guidance made a complete convert of him. These are also said to be the paths to liberation.

In this congenial atmosphere twelve years passed—but still no sign of grace from the guru! Narsihmadas was a bit unhappy. Massive indeed must be his sins, which blocked the way. Once while sitting near his guru he shed tears. Jagannathdas immediately understood the cause of his grief and said, “My blessings son. Since you have seen the Lord, and have been blessed by Him, there is no question of your demerits. But for self-realisation you have to approach another guru Hundekar das. I made you stay here to save you from accidental death. Now you may leave.” Narasimhadas was happy and started making preparations. Jagannath das gave him a staff and said, “This is your guard, when a snake bites you, you must keep the staff on the wound and you will be cured.” Narasimhadas was sad because he had to go, but this gift from his guru assured him of his presence with him always.

Hundekar das warmly welcomed his new disciple, who had come with the full blessing of Jagannath das. He ordained him and gave him the nom de plume Guru shreesh vithal. Thus graced by two stalwarts, Narsimhadas took giant strides in the spiritual field, and his fame spread.

Things happened as foretold and a serpent bit the das. He did what his master had told him and escaped death. Then with his guru's permission he settled down in a place called Kuntoji, on the bank of the river Tungbhadra. He had his own disciples to guide and busied himself with literary activities. A small platform was built on the riverbank for his pooja and contemplation. It still stands and is circumambulated by those who seek cures and blessings, and they are not disappointed. Such is the power of tapas!

Next he settled down at Kampli (Bellary dist.) on the bank of the river Tungbhadra. The rest of his life he spent there.

Godmen (real!) do not crave for publicity. Though possessed of great powers they live like common men. But they cant stop miracles happening—may be for the good of the public, or to enlighten the ignorant or to give a message or simply because the Lord wills it so!

During the upanayana ceremony of his son all the local people had been invited. The programme went as per schedule, but after pooja there was a problem. There was no ghee in the house. Because the river was in flood, no butter could be brought across. Without abhigar (sprinkling ghee on food) neither god nor man can have dinner! It was a difficult situation because hundreds of guests were waiting. Now was the time for the potential power to become kinetic. The Das had a pot of water brought from the river and kept it before the idols. He uttered the necessary incantations and prayed. And lo, the pot was full of fragrant ghee. No need to say that the guests enjoyed their food. After the flood, when the ghee was received, a pot of it was poured in the river. Narasimhdas had paid back what he had borrowed!

Every day, in the early morning, the das went to the river to take a bath, with a disciple. One day when he was returning, he came across an untouchable, who wanted some water from him. Without any hesitation the Das poured water from his pot while the disciple watched with wonder. After reaching home, preparations were made for his bath, but he washed his feet and straightway entered the pooja room. He wanted water for abhishek and told the disciple to bring the pot. What the Gita teaches-- the learned make no distinction between dogs and dog-eaters-- godmen practice! The disciple lifted the pot expecting it to be half-full but it was full of water! Now the enlightened disciple fell at the feet of his guru and begged to be pardoned.

Once the trio—Jagannath das, Praneshdas, and Shridvithaldas were at Tirupati. They sat in a quiet spot and were having a hearty discussion about matters spiritual. Suddenly, Jagannath das remembered Shreeshvithal das and exclaimed, “Oh if he were here!” A voice was heard, “Guruji I’m here”. From Kampli the das had come here and materialised!

During his last days, he made a pilgrimage to Benaras with the members of his family. While crossing the river Bhagirathi the boat sank, he was the only survivor He requested a person to send a letter stating that all had been drowned and proceeded to Badari. That was in the month of Margashirsh, the tithi amavasya. So on that day his death anniversary is observed

The Das’s residence and the idols he worshipped are at Kampli. His tanpura was handed over to a person with his blessings. There are some lineal descendants and some of his works are available.

Laxmipativithaldas, Venkatvithaldas, and Laxmishvithaldas are his well-known disciples.

2 Selected poetry:

Tributes:

a.

Bowing to the feet of Shri Ramana,
And with his grace, I son of Narayan das,
Pen these lines, according to my lights.
Guru Madhwa is the preceptor of the three worlds,
With his blessing and at the bidding of the Lord,
They came, Purandara, Vijayadas
To save those drowning in the sea of earthly life,
Forgetting His name.
They prayed, they served Hari,
Contemplating on the Maker’s deeds.
They kept a straight path, free from sin,

Fulfilling the wishes of those who came to them,
All these, the worshippers of the feet of
Laxmi pati vithala.

b.

Guru Shreeshraya, his mind free from desire, envy,
Contemplating Shrinivasa seated in his heart,
praying with great devotion,
Him I approached, a nonentity to be saved.
He accepted, and told me to serve those who
Served Laxmi pati vithala.

c.

The disciple and the preceptor—
What kind of a person is the guru, and what kind the disciple? What
are the disciple's problems, how can they be solved, and with what results?
The following stanzas provide the answers:

i.

The disciple—

I have sinned,
Am greedy, irreligious,
I covet other people's money, wives,
A cheat, my faults are beyond count.
Religious lore I cannot read or write,
Contemplate I cant, nor earn the grace of God
Rhyme or metre I don't know,
I can't praise the Lord, such is my state!

ii. The preceptor—

The guru is a meeting point
Of supreme knowledge, devotion and faith in Hari,
The mere touch of his feet frees one from all sins,
Contact with him is alchemic,
He is compassionate, forgiving and cordial,
Resting at the feet of the Lord.

iii. The remedy--

So go to the guru, seek his shelter
be free from sorrow,
and have your wishes fulfilled.

Why borrow buttermilk from the neighbor,
when the Divine cow stands in your shed?
Why beg for food,
standing before the wish-fulfilling tree
Why dig a well,
when the Ganges flows by your house?
Serve not the wicked,
rather serve the devotees of Laxmi pati vithal.

iv. The result--

Like sprinkling ghee on rice,
Like a big river channelised,
He purifies,
Like a thirsty calf searching for his mother,
meeting the Divine cow,
Like a beggar roaming the country,
getting a string of magic beads,
The guru will rush to your aid before Hari,
Though,
The planets be in an unfavourable position,
Kings and subjects dislike you,
Laxmi pati vithala.

---By Laxmipati vithal das (disciple)

3. Salutations to Madhwaraya and his successors:

I bow to guru Madhwaraya and guru Jayaraya,
I bow to gurus Shripadraj, Vyasamuni and Vadiraja,
I bow to gurus Raghvendra, Vaikunthadas and Purandardas,
I bow to gurus Vijayadas, Bhagannadas and the das favoured by Ranga
I bow to guru Timmannadas, the most aloof*
and guru Hundekardas,
I bow to the lotus feet of all the great
devotees of Shreesh vithal.

*from worldly affairs

4. Hymns:

a.

Sing the praise of guru Raghvendra,
Earn merit galore, contentment honour.

Sing with fervor
Be free from woes, have your wishes fulfilled.
His glance will reduce your piled-up sins
to ashes.

To the good he will grant the eight-fold fortune
And point out the way to the service of the lord.
Words fail me to describe his renown,
To him the wicked have no access.

Stop visiting holy places,
But not to lose the gains—
Just circumambulate, sprinkle holy water on your head,
Pure in mind and body bow to him,
He will be pleased.

Hari—the freer of bonds—in him in four forms
is worshipped daily.
This sojourn of god-men is holier than Benares,
Kurukshetra,
Divine sages reside here,
The place is as good as the residence of the Lord,
The knowers get full benefit,
But upon the others Shreesvithal showers blessings,
As per their merit.

b.

I had a glimpse of Pandhariraya,
Pundalikvarada.
The beloved of the Pandavas, of immense fame,
Protector of the destitute, a fan of music

The all-pervasive,
The all-protector-controller-uplifter,
Lord of the earth, of indescribable fame,
Mentor of Maruti, Guru Shreesh vithal.

c.

Govinda, I had a peep at your holy feet,
As a fruition of the merit my of previous births

As a supplicant you went to Bali,
A stone you transformed into a woman,
Favored Him who bears the Ganges on His head.

You, the father of Ganges,
Who washes the sins of the world,
Your very sight drives away evils,
Brings joy, Shreeshvithal.

4. Miscellaneous:

a.

We pray to you Krishna,
Go not to Madhura, don't, don't!
Parents and children we have abandoned,
Look upon you as our sole kith and kin,
Even in our dreams you we see,
Lord of the gods don't go, don't!
In the early morning we touch your feet,
feel happy.

The belligerent Kamsa invited you ,
Power-intoxicated fool, does he not know
That you killed demon Madhu?
We pray go not to your uncle's place.
The township terms you lascivious,
Don't bother
Without you we cant even breathe,
You go, we follow,
Lead, Shreeshvithal.

b.

Born as a worm or an insect,
What can a soul achieve?
But now being born a human, have a try.

c.

Pralhad, Dhruva were led by Narada,
Guided by sages a hunter became a rishi,
All the gods approach you through the spouse.
of Bharati,
So let me be more devoted to your henchmen
Than to you Shreesh vithal!!

d. Devotion of nine kinds—

Listen to His story –with all attention,

Sing His praise,
Know Him to be the supreme,
Meet His devotees,
Feel His presence everywhere, and worship,
Fall at His feet, the eight parts(of the body)
touching the ground,
Be in the company of the learned,
Declare the spouse of Laxmi your kin,
Surrender yourself to Him, mind and body,
Then you will
Feel great joy, be free.
And stand in His presence!

c.

Karjagi das wrote the last chapter of Harikathamrutasara.
His disciple Gurushreesh vithal writes an appreciation of it--

Good men, study these lines with care,
written by the first among his peers.
Neither stays at holy places, nor inquiry into the shastras
Is as beneficial.
Study them with a mind pure,
And receive His grace.
The lines provide a brilliant insight to the devotee,
But read them not to the stupid,
Guru Shreesh vithal will fill you with joy!

I am grateful to the Mutaliks for lending me a copy of the book.