

Haridasas of Karnataka

Shri Purandara das – A brief note

- Prof D. V. Potdar

Purandara Das day was observed on 29 January 2006.

Shrinivas Naik a millionaire but a miser had a traumatic experience. So he donated his entire property and became a mendicant. In course of time, he was ordained by Vyasraya and named Purandara Das. Like all mystics, he had glimpses of the Divine. In a good number of lyrics he describes the splendor of his Lord and of his own ecstasy. He did not shut himself off from the world, in fact he could not. Having no assets left he had to go from door to door to beg his living. Being very sensitive and blessed with poetic talent he reacted to almost all the surrounding sights and sounds and composed lyrics prolifically. He saw around him a lot of hypocrisy and could not help laughing at it. When he went to collect alms one hussy gave a dozen reasons for her inability to give him food and another simply banged the door in his face! Once while walking by the riverside he saw a man diving in the river and counting his fingers - perhaps an unfaithful husband; that reminds him of an unfaithful wife who practices many vows - both of them foolishly hoping to benefit from their actions. Passing before a kitchen he saw Brahmin cooks who nearly murder a dog hitting it with a pestle because it has sniffed at their pots. He is amused by a Brahmin hopping in the streets like a frog lest he be defiled. He mourns the loss of his shoes (may be a new pair!) but then consoles himself thus - the man who filched his footwear perhaps carried away his sins also (paposu –shoes; split the word papa + osu - all sins). He sings the glory of the loin-cloth and blesses his wife (may her tribe increase) for opening his eyes and showing him the spiritual path. Slanderers have been busy in all societies and at all times. See how Purandar looks at them –

Welcome slander!

As pigs clean up a street,

Slanderers cleanse us of our sins,

Flatterers but bow and rob us of our merits

The righteous in the world shine because of the wicked

etc.

All these lyrics appear to be humorous but the underlying note of deep feeling and irony cannot be missed!

Purandar explains the tenets of his faith – dualism as expounded by Acharya Madhwa - and extols them. He earnestly appeals to people to follow and practice them because (according to him) - that way lies salvation.

The people of his time stuck to rituals, but these are tricky things. The form and details may be there but if the spirit is missing they are simply a show. Purandar tried to explain and emphasize the real spirit behind some of them. For example a daily bath is not just a part of a ritual but a ritual in itself. Purandara explains its significance thus—we dip in a

river to get rid of the dirt on our body - so we must plunge in the waters of knowledge to get rid of our ego. He gives a long list of acts which are as meritorious as a dip in the holy waters or in the Ganges itself! They are - care of parents, removing all kinds of bonds, awareness of our destiny(as human beings), a moral attitude, non-stealing, attempts to understand the highest truth, self-knowledge, avoidance of unfair speech and acts, tending in-laws and heeding her husband(by the wife), study of the Vedas and knowledge of the five distinctions etc. During daily worship if our mind wanders the idols we keep before us are like those exhibited in a brassware shop - just for show and sale! While contemplating we must concentrate otherwise it becomes a farce— like a stork standing quietly in the water waiting to pounce on a fish!

Purandara has rightly stressed the importance of the teacher for getting spiritual knowledge and attaining salvation. He himself has high praise for his teachers -Acharya Madhwa and Vyasaraya. Dasas who came later have paid tributes to Purandara.

All his lyrics are in different ragas and can be set to different tals (tunes) - that is his contribution to music.

I conclude with a letter—

Here's a note sent by our Lord
To be read and (the advice) to be followed.
He says –
Give up desire and anger,
Follow regulations, hobnob not with the rabble,
Signed - the father of the God of love!

Covet not women,
Grab not gold or land,
Signed - the lotus in the navel!

Ready thyself with jingling feet,
To shout the name of Hari at every step,
Signed by Purandar Vithal himself!

Tributes:

In Indian mythology the upper worlds are inhabited by divine beings ruled by a supreme Lord. When an extraordinary person is born on the earth it is usual to trace his/her origin to one of the beings above. Purandar was initially a Gandharva who was reborn as Narada. This divine sage was associated with child devotees Dhruva and Pralhada, and while passing by hell was moved by the suffering of the souls there. He shouted loudly the name of Narayana and other gods and freed the souls from their misery. It was at his instance that Vyasa wrote the Bhagavata for his own comfort and for the welfare of the people. During Kaliyuga Narada was reborn on the earth and continued the good work.

To the question why was Purandara immersed in worldly affairs for a long time one Raghunath (das?) seems to provide the answer--Narada during a visit to the Venkatesh temple felt thirsty after dinner. A boy supplied him with a glass of water but there was some delay. The angry Narada hit the boy on the head with the glass. Later it was found that the boy was the Lord himself! Since Narada had dazed (!) the boy he himself was dazed (by ignorance) for some time!

But once he took up the path of renunciation Purandara rose to great heights. He guided kindred souls who came to him and made them march with him. That is why tributes poured in from his grateful followers when he was alive and after he passed away. All of them pray with one voice to help them get rid of their vices, their sins past, present and future and lead them on to the path of salvation.

Vyasarayya his guru speaks of dasas who are fakes--they just put on the garb to fool the people and get material benefits. But Purandara is of a different class because of his knowledge, devotion and missionary spirit.

Vijayadas who has written a number of lyrics about Purandara completely surrenders himself--is prepared to hew wood and draw water for him. He says there is law and order in society and people are happy because of his guru's grace. Due to the same he is born a Brahmin and not only he but also his kith and kin and neighbors bask in it. He compares his present bliss to that of an invalid sick man lying in the desert hungry and thirsty but now removed to the cool shade of the Kalpataru! He hopes to receive the grace of other dasas and that of God, which will help him to attain the highest bliss.

Regarding his own works Vijaydas is very humble--he is simply a servant in the mint putting his stamp on the material supplied by the owner: his guru. One should not be proud of one's own achievement—it is silly—like the firefly hovering over the lotus thinking that he is responsible for its blooming, ignoring the rising sun!

Purandar's works have the weight of the Upanishads because of the seer behind them. Once they were kept on Madhwa's works and a disciple removed them, but again they occupied the same place! Vyasamuni saw this and reprimanded the pupil—the works were as important as the works of the Master.

Madhwa's philosophy was to reach the people through two channels—the Vyasakoota and the Daskoota. The former consisted of a bunch of scholars discussing his works and trying to make them popular among the learned--rather highbrow! But Purandara straightway went among the masses singing and dancing preaching the tenets of dwaita mata. He toured the country and visited all the holy places. He democratized the dasakoota --any devotee could join it. This entente policy made it possible for men like Kanaka to enter the fold and make their contribution to it.

Purandara's narrative skills may be seen in the story of a fellow-student of Krishna he related. This Kuchaila (lit. rags) was poverty-stricken and was advised by his wife to go

and meet Krishna. He did so and because of his devotion he returned Sudhama! This was a good opportunity for Purandara to illustrate what he had written in his Bhaktisutras (in his previous birth).

Purandara's obituary runs thus—

On new-moon day, Pushya month, Raktakshi samvat, in Virupaksha kshetra in the presence of Vithal, Purandara ascended to vaikuntha in the divine plane.

OM TAT SAT