

Haridasas of Karnataka

Shri Shreepadraj: Life and Works

By

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1. Life:

Swarnavarnateertha, a pontiff of the matha started by Padnanabhateertha (a disciple of Acharya Madhwa) was journeying in his palanquin. Dusk was falling and he was not sure how far he was from his destination. Putting out his head he saw a boy with a herd of cows. He called him and asked “How far is Abbur from here?”

The boy’s reply was enigmatic.

“Look hither, look thither, consider the time, and decide!”

The answer came to the swamiji in a flash—look hither—at the boy, look thither—the herd of cows, consider the time—evening, so the village must be quite near!

The swamiji was impressed and told the boy to come along with him. But he refused, saying that if he did so he would have to be an ascetic. Already his brother was one, and his parents were not happy. The swamiji smiled and proceeded.

The boy’s name was Laxminarayana. His parents were poor. His origin is traced to Dhruva. When Narayana appeared before him Laxmi had made a request—the boy had suffered a lot, so he must have all comforts in his future life. Narayana had agreed.

The father had coached the intelligent boy Laxminarayan at home.

Swarnavarnateertha met Purushottamateertha at Abbur. Both were very happy to see each other. Purushottamateertha had a good disciple and Swarnavarnateertha expressed his desire to have one. He spoke about the boy he had met the previous day. Purushottamateertha knew the boy’s parents and sent for them. When they heard about the swamiji’s intentions they were worried—one son was an ascetic, and if the other followed suit, what would be their fate. But receiving assurances from both the swamijis they agreed. Thus Laxminarayan joined the swamiji’s retinue.

It was a rare combination—a brilliant teacher, and a bright student. After the upanayana ceremony the swamiji declared him to be his successor and ordained him. He was named Shripadraj and sent to Vibhudendrateertha—a noted teacher and a scholar—for further coaching. Tutored in the best possible manner, Shripadraj returned to his teacher, well versed in Madhwa siddhanta and other shastras. The guru was very happy and delegated all his duties to him. Watching him carrying on his work in a very able manner, the swamiji passed away.

Shreepadraj started on his tours and in the course of his journey came to Mulbagil. Then under the Vijayanagar rulers this place was a junction for pilgrims on their way to holy places. Mythologically a hundred legends were associated with it. It was a well-known

education centre for Brahmins and Veershaivas. There was a big monastery belonging to the latter. When Shreepadraj decided to settle down there he was invited to stay in this place. He agreed to do so on a condition—there must be a religious debate, and only if he won he would do so. He was successful and was offered the place together with the present of a bullock-topped bell.

It was a time when the foundations of Hinduism were being shaken by the onslaught of Muslim rulers. Shreepadraj was fully aware of the conditions and made his plans carefully, his main purpose being the propagation of Madhwa siddhanta. Already there was a group of scholars studying and teaching dualism in the country, But Shreepadraj was concerned with the common people--ignorant of Sanskrit but bubbling with devotion.

Under the able guidance of Shreepadraj the centre flourished and was upraised to a university status. A brilliant ascetic Vyasraya joined it. He received the full guidance of Shreepadraj and bloomed.

One night Vyasraya had a dream—he was told by Vithal to go to Pandharpur with his gurus, and have a certain place dug up. When his advice was followed a box was found containing two tins. In one was the idol of Rangvithal with Satyabhama. From that time onwards Shreepadraj accepted the nom de plume Rang vithal while writing spiritual lyrics. Another tin opened later, had an idol of Venugopal in it. Shreepadraj handed it over to Vyasraya for daily worship.

Once a sad person came to Shreepadraj because he had committed the sin of killing a Brahmin. Shreepadraj told him not to worry, and started sprinkling him with water filled in a conch. For this he was criticized by some gossips—but he proved his point by sprinkling the same water on a cloth dipped in tar, and turning it white in course of time. He did the same favour to a king, Salva Narasimha, who invited him to his kingdom and honoured him in a royal manner. From that time onwards Swamiji dressed, decorated himself, and ate like a prince.(cf. Raghunathteertha's remark "We are shripad (ascetics) but you are Shreepad raj (sovereign among ascetics!). Again gossip was active and he had to teach certain people a lesson. A Muslim officer brought a dish of meat as an offering. Without batting an eyelid Shreepadraj sprinkled water from a conch on it and turned the flesh into flowers and fruit!

He visited Benares—a beehive of pandits of all sorts. His arrival created a hubbub and many challenges were thrown. Difficult to believe—but all the scholars were defeated. One of them was Chaitanya Prabhupad, the founder of the Krishna pantha. This was too much for some jealous people and they resorted to black art, as a result Shreepadraj lost his power of speech. Unperturbed, he started repeating Hayagreeva mantra, and rid himself of the evil effects

Narasimha Bhupal, his favourite king gave him a bracelet to decorate Rang vithala with. That god played a prank—disguised as Shreepadraj, he went to a dance programme and gave the bracelet to the danseuse as a gift. At another music concert, when the woman

came wearing the same bracelet, the king saw it and was shocked. He decided to ask swamiji and did so. Shreeipadraj just smiled, and taking the bracelet out of the tin handed it over to him The king apologized.

For all Hindus, a visit to Benares and a dip in the Ganges are musts. The poor in the Brahmin community could not afford to do it, so they requested the swamiji to take them on a pilgrimage. He was in a fix. But Bhagirathi appeared before him and said that Kashi was not a better place than Mulbagil. Since people were so keen she would appear as a spring in Narasimha teertha. There were prayers throughout the whole night, and in the morning the lake was snow white--- an indication of the presence of Ganges. The happy people made offerings, and had a hearty bath.

Shreepadraj wrote both for the classes and the masses. Vagvajra, written in Sanskrit is a gloss on Jayateertha's Shriman-nyayasudha. The major part of his literary output is in Kannada.

Narahariteertha is believed to be the pioneer of the daskoota. Shreepadraj made a major contribution to its progress by his works in Kannada. Vyasraya continued the work. His two illustrious disciples Purandar das and Kanak das developed it. From then onwards the movement went on snowballing.

The following story gives us an idea of Shreepadraj's scholarship. His disciple Vyasraya toured the country, and once he defeated a great scholar Pakshadhara mishra. The man wondered, if the disciple is such a Titan what about the guru. He came all the way to Mulbagil and paid his respects to Shreepadraj.

Saluva Narsimha was a close disciple of Shreepadraj, and wanted him to be his life-long mentor. But since this was not possible, Shreepadraj told him that his disciple Vyasraya would fill that place. Honors were heaped upon the reluctant disciple. Shreepadraj had to explain to him the responsibilities of spiritual heads

Shreepadraj was the spiritual light, which had illumined all parts of the country for nearly a century. Now the light was about to fade.

In the month of Jyeshtha, during the bright half, on the fourteenth day, he entered alive the brindavan ready for him, reassuring the people "Though I will not be bodily present, my spirit will live on, encouraging you to do good deeds. Blessings".

Tributes:

There are many, both in Kannada and Sanskrit. I have selected one from each.

a.

I bow to my guru Shreepadraj, who stays at Narasimhateertha, contemplating the feet of Narasimha. Worship of his brindavan grants one pure knowledge, livestock and children. Contemplate on him and you get great fame and happiness.

-- Vyasraya

b.

Shripadraya is the incarnation of the great Dhruva,
and worships Ranga vithala;
Vyasraya, the incarnation of Pralhad
and part of Shesha,
worships Shree Krishna;
Purandara das is the incarnation
of the divine sage Narada,
and worships Vithala;
Look not upon these as just humans,
Lest you be damned!
Guru Madhwapati Vithala.

--Karpar narsimha

2. Works – Selected & Abridged:

All his works written in Kannada are available, so we have to be content with extracts and samples. I crave the indulgence of the reader for my choices.

a.

Meditation in the Krita age
Sacrifices, rituals in the Treta
Worship of the demon-killer in Dwapara,
(are usual)
But in the Kali age
Just sing the praise of Keshava
for the same gains,
Ranga vithala.

b.

Some build houses, and feel happy,
Some earn money, and feel happy,
Some beget children, and feel happy
Let them feel happy in their own way,
You are the only source of my happiness,
Rangavithala.

c.

Lost in the forest of earthly life, suffering,
The only way to exit, without fear,
Is to utter the name of Hari,
Help me to focus my mind on your feet,
Take me under your wing,
Ranga vithal.

d.

Like he-buffaloes fattened to be slaughtered,
He bestows wealth on the wicked, and then damns!
But His true devotees He keeps poor,
And ferries them across,
Ranga vithal.

e.

The sun and the moon can gauge the sky,
not the birds flying about.
The depth of the lake the lotus knows
not the trees and bushes on the bank.
The sweetness of the mango the parrot knows
not the crows that caw,
Your excellence your devotees know,
not others.
You Ranga vithal, at our service,
And also in command, be our shelter.

f.

Lakumi,
What drew you to Vasudeva, with the ebony-body?
Whisked away when He was born,
He grew up in Gokula,
drank pots of milk, and danced on Kaliya's head,
stole into the homes of cowherds, relished their curds,
spoke softly to the cowgirls, seduced them,

killed His uncle, married sixteen thousand maidens.
Ranga vithala resides on the bank of Kaveri,
But relaxes on a serpent-bed.

g.

Sheshagirivas Varavenkatesha,
See what befits what—

Uttering the name of Narayana
befits the tongue,
Going on a pilgrimage befits the legs
A pot of Tulsi is befitting to a house,
And listening to the story of Vishnu befits the ears.

Charity is befitting to the hands,
And honour to men,
To the sages knowledge,
and to a woman devotion to her husband.

Gazing at Ranga befits the eyes,
Bowing to the auspicious Lord befits the head,
A string of charming Tulsi beads befits the neck,
Singing your praise is the most befitting, Ranga vithal!

h.

Only Shesha, with many heads
Can describe the piety of Vyasaraaya!

Some ascetics tour the country to earn bread,
Eat anything, anywhere and fool the people.
But Vyasaraaya
Has wells and tanks dug, builds colonies,
Feeds thousands of Brahmins,
And is praised for his noble work and qualities.

Day and night he worships,
Hari's lotus feet with devotion
Favourite of Brahmanya teertha-- a devotee of Raghupati--
He clings to Ranga vithal always.

i.

Squander not your life,
But worship Teerthapada, and earn his grace.

Get up early mornings, bathe in the river
Place a string of jasmine buds on Hari's feet.
Bring a conch-ful of water, shower Hari,
And decorate Him with flowers and sandalwood paste.
Pluck Tulsi leaves, place them on Him,
And with folded hands sing His praise.
On Haridina* give up all comforts,
And with devotees sing and keep awake all night.
Born a human—the best among His creation--
But short-lived,
Surrender yourself to Hari,
Otherwise you have lived in vain!

*Haridina—ekadashi.

j.

Courtezans show you the door,
when your pockets are empty,
From bare trees birds fly away,
Animals quit a forest on fire,
The gallant after some time,
Ditches the hussy.
But the bonds of compassion,
That bind Ranga vithal and His devotee
Are real, lasting!

k.

The cowgirls cook up complaints,
Call me thief, to get me killed, Ma!
How can I drink a pot of milk
my stomach is not a tank.
If I swallow butter kept apart for God,
will he not blind me?
To indulge in mischief,
am I a grown-up boy?
Listen not to their complaints, please.
Softened, Gopamma picked up Rang vithal,
and lulled Him to sleep!

l.

Light and shadow, that is life!

Plucky Dharma gambled, lost his all,
Draupadi, as a maidservant, had to stay with
Virata for a year,
Hari, the supreme, drove Partha's chariot,
Harischandra, an emperor, became a pariah's servant,
When wealth lasts relatives and friends flock,
When it is lost, they turn up their noses, camel-like,
Surrounded by vehicles, servants, jingling cash,
if you shell out money, they'll say you're god-like
Ranga vithal.

m.

For performing rituals,
I went to collect funds
from door to door,
I could not sell, there were no buyers,
You rush, and help me
Ranga vithal.

n.

When there is complete surrender,
of body mind and wealth,
Why do you tempt me?
Why pay taxes, when goods have been surrendered?
Merciful Ranga vithal, let me seek shelter at your feet.

o, Narrative poems:

Lullabies:

Lullabies included in this section? Yes, because they run for pages, narrating all the deeds of Hari during the incarnations. It is also an occasion for the poet to describe the charm of the women surrounding the cradle.

a. The cradle:

The earth was the golden cradle,
The sun and the moon the kalashas*,
The four Vedas the ropes,
Tied to the sky above.

b. The child:

You killed a demon to save the Vedas,

Supported the Mandara Mountain to help the gods,
Killed Hiranyaka to rescue the earth,
When a child called,
you smashed a pillar and emerged
As Kalki You ride a horse,
Lotus in the navel, fond of devotees,
Go to sleep, Shriranga vithal.

c.

The surrounding women:

Their lips were like sprouts,
Their garments colourful,
As they rocked the cradle gracefully,
Their anklets tinkled,
Their necklaces glittered,
And they were full of joy!

* a pot full of water over which a cocoanut is kept.

d.

Shree Madhwa Nama:

For followers of Madhwa, daily recitation of Harivayustuti, and Madhwa Vijay is a must. The style of the former work is a bit tough, and there are certain restrictions for recitation like time, place and gender. Shripadraj had all these points in mind and also the members of the daskoota, the common people. The theme is the same--descriptions of the three incarnations of Vayu, and the way they served Hari. There are echoes of the two Sanskrit works in this composition and it is written in quartets.

a. Hanuma:

When the presiding deities of the organs depart,
You just become blind, deaf or dumb,
But when Mukhyaprana, the chief departs,
You drop down dead, a corpse.

b.. Bhima:

The poison given by Duryodhana,
he digested, and belched.
He finished the serpents let loose on him
When the house of wax was set on fire,

He carried his brothers to the safety of the
Janhavi shore.

c.

I bow to Madhwaraya,
Who went to the hermitage at Badari,
Learnt the gist of the Vedas from the Lotus in the navel ,
And attained the rank of Brahma.

Jagannath das mentions the benefits accruing from reading the work—it frees you from all sorrows, brings you joy, and leads you to the presence of Jagannath vithal. It ferries you across the waters of earthly life.

e. Shree Laxmi Narasimha Pradurbhava Dandaka:

It narrates the story of Narasimhavatara as told by Narada to Kaunteya. Shripadraj tells it in the regional language.

The glory of the poem is in the onomatopoeic effects of the lines and the series of pictures they paint. The narrative moves quickly because of the short run-on lines suited to the action. All the rasas (sentiments) are evoked. The sublimity of the work reminds one of the eleventh chapter of the Bhagavad-Gita—only here we have Narasimha darshan! The pitch of the imagination of both the poets is on the same level. The narrative is dramatic in some parts. While reading the work we meet not Shreepadraj the ascetic but the poet par excellence.

Miscellaneous:

a.

Eyes you have in vain, if you have not viewed
the idol of Kaveri ranga
--auspicious to the three worlds--
and His holy feet.

And also
Ranga vithal,
Decked out with, necklaces gem-studded,
and a string of large pearls,
Seated in the chariot, drawn through the streets.

b.

Lord Hari

You bestow and you take away,
By your grace, I sleep in a charming bedroom
on a lovely cot,
Your grace withdrawn,
I have to sleep in a charity- house,
my head pillowed on my arm!

c.

Tell me mother, who is this riding a bullock?
He is the grandson of Rama's lord,
Wearing as an ornament a serpent
with a thousand tongues.

d.

Oh Krishna,
Why did you bring me in this world?
I have no food to eat, no clothes to wear,
I had to run away to the forest,
abandoning mother and wife!

d.

Come Ranga, let us play,
The Pandavas and Kauravas gambled,
The Pandavas have lost,
have to relinquish their kingdom,
Come let us rush!

e.

Don't forget Ranga,
Once you were in the company of cowherds
With staff and flute in your hands,
Your food-packet under your arm,
Grazing the cows in the forest.

f.

I pray to you, Krishna, reside in my heart
Let my head bow to you,
My eyes, full of love, behold you,
My ears hear your praise,
My nose smell the fragrance of the flowers
dropping from your feet,

Let my tongue praise you,
And palms be joined to greet,
Let my legs take me on a pilgrimage,
And my mind be filled with your form.

Let me be in the company of the good
So that I may study god-lore,
That's my orison, merciful Ranga vithal.

OM TAT SAT.