

Haridasas of Karnataka

### **Shridvithaldas: Life and Works**

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#### 1. Life:

“Every saint has a past and every sinner a future.”

In the middle of the eighteenth century, Karjagi (Present Haveri dist), a small village on the bank of the river Varada, was well- known for its scenic beauty. It was a centre of Vedic learning. Many scholars resided there and maintained the sacred fire. Students flocked from all parts of the country and were provided with free boarding and lodging. They were taught in the traditional manner. A Vithal temple was the centre of all the activities.

Between 1840 and 1850 a child was born in the village accountant's house and was named Dasappa. The family was well- to- do and the boy had a happy childhood. He received whatever education was available in the village and succeeded to his father's profession. After his parents passed away, youth and wealth made him take the wrong path. In due course he was married to a virtuous girl, Gundamma. His daily programme was getting up in the early morning and after bath and rituals, attending to his work in the chavadi (office). Then he would go to the fields to supervise the work there and after returning, have his lunch. In the evening he would dress up and visit a prostitute's house. He would return late at night, but his faithful and patient wife would wait to serve him food. She would go to him only if he was in a good mood -- a girl true to her name (Gundamma means a boulder). Occasionally, Dasappa would attend a function in the Vithal temple in his official capacity, but not out of religious fervor.

At that time, Jagannath Das, the great mystic, was touring the country with his disciple Pranesh Das. He visited Karjagi and straightway went to the house of Dasappa. Gundamma bowed down to him and received him warmly. Both the Guru and disciple blessed her and she was thrilled. It is to bring light to such dark houses that god- men are moving about, they have no axe of their own to grind!

Next day, Gundamma made all arrangements for pooja and prepared nice dishes. Dasappa causally looked over the arrangements and, telling the guests to make themselves at home, went away to attend to his work. Jagannath Das performed pooja and offered the dishes to his Ishta Devata. When Dasappa returned, all had lunch together.

In the evening, Dasappa followed his routine while his wife prayed! Some residents of the village came to Jagannath Das and requested him to deliver a religious discourse. He agreed to do so and before he left told Gundamma to attend it with her husband. The woman thought this was the proper time for her to air her grievances and pleaded her

inability to do so. Jagannath Das assured her that if she were to go and try, her husband would certainly come. Emboldened by his words, she agreed to do so, because the Lord has to see to it that the words uttered by his true devotees come true!

In the evening, Gundamma lighted lamps in the pooja room and and before the tulsi plant and covering her head with the upper part of sari went to the house of the prostitute, the words of the guests still ringing in her ears. The prostitute panicked to see her and ran to see Dasappa. She told him that sister had come there. He was puzzled—who was this sister come to see him? Trembling the woman replied, “Your wife”. Dasappa rushed out and asked his wife, “Why did you come here?” She told him what the guests had requested her to do. The soft way in which she spoke knocked him down in a heap! He said, “You please go I’ll follow”. Rushing inside he told the woman that he would be back shortly. She replied, “Please don’t, let the gentle lady be not hurt”. Dasappa left in a hurry.

Coming home, he had a bath and, along with his wife, proceeded to the temple. Jagannath Das saw him and made a gesture to come near him. When he did so the audience was wide-eyed.

Jagannath Das told his disciple to start the function with a song. Pranesh Das chanted — “Grieve not over the past you poor creature, take the righteous path now. Involvement with land and wealth, bad conduct will not bring thee happiness neither here nor there. Just worship not idols but honour saints. Be not after penance or vows but crave for the grace of god, etc”. The effect of the song was like a whiplash on Dasappa. He murmured to himself the lyric of Purandar Das which says — “You cannot hold a person fully responsible for his good or bad deeds, because he is like a puppet in the hands of the Divine puppeteer! ” However, Dasappa was carried away in a flood of repentance and fell at the feet of Jagannath Das, requesting him to uplift him. The Guru was happy because a gem covered by dirt was cleaned up to be kept on the feet of the Lord. The very next day, Jagannath Das ordained him and gave him the ankita (nom de plume, given by the Guru or sometimes by a God) Sridvithal (Shrid — bestower of wealth or knowledge) with the prayer — “Oh Lord, residing in the souls of all, look upon him as your own son, free him from all worldly sorrows, let him be devoted to your feet, be in the happy company of those versed in god-lore. Be all his actions righteous, shower your affection on him, and ever dwell in his heart.”

It was a rebirth for Dasappa. Then on he became a favourite disciple of Jagannath Das, so much so, that he had the privilege of writing a few lines enumerating the benefits of reading his Guru’s masterpiece, Harikathamrutsara.

Now, Dasappa spent all his time in the Vithal temple, dancing and singing the glory of his Lord. In course of time, he obtained the idols of Murali Krishna and Rama with Sita. On the eleventh day of every month (Hindu calendar) he kept awake at night singing and requested Krishna to play on his flute. Legend has it that Krishna granted his prayer!

Gundamma who had been cooperating with him in all his activities so far passed away. Dasappa was alone now since he had no children. Haridasas who came there occasionally

were his only companions. This state did not worry him because he sang to himself —  
“Be not frightened, Oh my soul / For the Lord who breaks all worldly ties will keep thee whole! “

When he was eighty, he sensed his end was near. He put the idols in a box and hid it in a wall of his house. Squatting on a seat of darbha (a kind of grass), he controlled his breath and passed away in a manner befitting a saint.

Hearing of his death, people gathered to perform the last rites. Suddenly, four resplendent Brahmins appeared claiming to be the relatives and started making arrangements for the funeral. They carried away the body and cremated it on the banks of the Varada. Then they dived in the river and disappeared! Who were the four still remains a mystery!

Purandara Das sang —  
“For god- men temples are where,  
The glory of God is sung.  
The various gods themselves  
Are their relations!”

## 2. Selected works:

The Das’s works can be divided into four kinds - 1) Tributes paid to his guru and other saints. 2) Hymns to different gods. 3) Narrative poems. 4) Philosophical musings. Much is lost in translation, but as the shadow gives us some idea of an object, I hope the following lines will give the reader a notion of the sublimity of the original.

Tributes:

1.

Sister, hear the renown of the  
favourites of Ranga,  
They worship Him in the nine ways of devotion,  
Like listening to his stories, do good deeds,  
Control body and mind,  
And attain His feet.

2.

Surrender yourself to the Guru,  
and feel not helpless.  
Heaps of your sins he will destroy,  
Ferry you and all good men across the waters of life,  
narrating the story of the Lord,  
Nectar-like to the ears.  
Our god-lore he has made an open book,

And defied all the heretics.  
Righteous from birth, a devotee of Vishnu .  
He taught the Master's creed,  
He is non-pareil!

3.

Obituary to Jagannath Das:  
Jagannath Das has left for Hari's abode,  
With the name of the Lord on his lips.  
In Shukla Samvat, Bhadrapad month,  
On the ninth day, during the bright half,  
Declaring Hari to be the Supreme!  
Honoured by all, he departed the earth in the company of gods,  
Contemplating His feet,  
In the Divine plane.  
Ever affectionate, smiling, kind and free from anger.  
He orated the story of Hari, to lead the good on the right path,  
Following regulations always,  
God-minded, excelling in music,  
With his mind on Shridvithal he went,  
While auspicious music played !

4.

Agaja\*, the world laughs at your family!  
Alas, what a husband your father found for you!  
Hungry, He fed on poison.  
Leather garments He wears, holds a skull in His hand,  
The cemetery is His home, ghosts and spirits His retinue,  
Wrathful, He is difficult to live with.  
One son, six-headed, spews milk, likes not His company,  
Another with an elephant-head,  
Is a do-gooder with a torn stomach.  
Still, Menaka, the mother, dotes on her daughter!  
Shivashakti, Thou art the strength behind Thy Husband,  
No one as lucky as Thee!  
Whatever the poets sang ,  
Shridvithal knows the truth.

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Agaja—daughter of a mountain, Parvati  
Did the lines yam kamaye, etc (Shreesukta) inspire the poet to write this poem ?  
The figure of speech is Vyajastuti.

5.

Wonder of wonders, Vithala  
You fled Pandhari\*.  
Were You tired of the heretics shouting around You?  
Did You steal away because You did not like  
the ways of the Madhwa-haters?  
Shridvithal, have You come here to honour those,  
who seek Thy excellence in the Vedas?

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Pandhari — Pandharpur.

6.

Narayan Govind Hari, Hari/Narayan Govind,  
In the form of a fish, You killed the demons,  
retrieved the Vedas.  
When the Mandara mountain started sinking,  
as a tortoise You supported it.  
As a wild boar You slew the sons of Aditi.  
Wielding conch and disc,  
You emerged smashing a pillar.  
As a chaste batu,  
You approached King Bali.  
To decimate the warrior clan,  
You were born as the son of Bhrigu.  
As the son of Dasharatha You destroyed Ravana,  
and brought back Sita.  
As a kid of Nandagopa,  
You lived amidst herds of cows.  
As a handsome boy You moved among gopis,  
and made them give up their vows.  
Shridvithal, compassionate one  
You were the guardian of the Nanda clan.

7.

Krishna, gopi and the husband !

My husband has come, Ranga!  
If we are found, then it is goodbye!  
Look, he knocks on the door and shouts,  
The neighbours listen and have their laugh!  
Proud, so far, I walked with my nose in the air,  
But now I am the laughing stock!  
You were rash and rushed inside,  
Now we are caught, and I'm undone!

8.

Philosophical musings:

Be not frightened, oh, my soul!  
Hari who breaks worldly ties will keep thee whole!  
Listen, our bonds hold,  
Till we the Lord behold.  
Immortal as thou art  
Nothing will thee hurt.  
Give up attachments—me and mine.  
Follow the path of those who follow Madhwa.  
Know, Hari creates, leads and is all pervasive  
And wash your hands off, of afflictions, merit or sin.  
Worldly wealth lasts not,  
Nihilism is a farce,  
Trust shrutis, remain a servant,  
Try not to be the Master!  
Shiva told His spouse, “The wind god is the prime mover,  
If He rests you can’t even blink”  
Whatever you give He takes,  
But call him Master, and He shies.  
Pray for help, He will stretch His hand,  
Start a match, and he will knock you down!  
Declare kinship with Govinda  
He cares not for your wealth, learning or clan.  
Fear not the wrath of the world,  
Remember He inspires, He acts through all.  
Mix not with the wicked,  
Make not enemies with the good,  
Beg not, stop not praying.  
Know Shridvithal is the supreme,  
He protects, He grants !

9.

Enough, enough the company of fools,  
Teaching wisdom to the witless  
is like bathing a wild elephant !  
Pointing out the right path to the wicked  
is like holding a mirror before the blind!  
Lecturing to the dullard,  
who utters not the name of Shridvithal,  
is like shouting before a rock!

10. A tribute to Shridvithal:

Shridvithal,  
Help me get over the three tribulations,  
Learn me the teachings of Madhwa,  
Be my brother, my father.  
While rolling in luxury, you met your Guru,  
And his words wrought -- an awakening, an awareness.  
Your bonds fell off,  
And you were ready to serve the Lord.  
I am in the same boat, ferry it,  
And lead me to Varadvithala!

- Srinivasdas

OM TAT SAT

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