

BUTTER-THIEF APPREHENDED IN BRAJ !

— SURDAS SINGS OF KRISHNA —

This *pada* attributed to Surdas may possibly be one of the few hundred actually written by the famous 16th-century poet, but more probably belongs to the few *thousand* written in his name by later generations: the *Sūrsāgar*, the ‘ocean’ of the poet Sur, admits many streams! But if the poem’s origin is uncertain, there is no doubting the brilliance with which it expresses the *camatkār* of a divine encounter. Concision and cohesion, orchestration of graphic images, blend of sweetness and depth, minutuarised drama, and a truly stunning conclusion – all these features combine to produce a truly memorable verse.

The *pada* is on the ‘butter-thief’ theme, and its narrative is entirely conventional: the young *mākhān-cōr* Krishna (Hari, Shyam, Nandkumar) creeps into the house of a cowherd to steal butter and curd, and is caught red- (or rather white-) handed. Our task is to look under the surface of this meaning, and to see how the poet achieves his ends.

देखि फिरे हरि ग्वाल दुवारें ।
तब इक बुद्धि रची अपनै मन, गए नाँघि पिछवारें ॥
सूनें भवन कहूँ कोउ नाही, मनु याही कौ राज ।
भाँड़े धरत उघारत मूँदत, दधि माखन कै काज ॥
रैनि जमाइ धर्यौ हो गोरस, पर्यौ स्याम कै हाथ ।
लै लै खात अकेले आपुन, सखा नहीं कोउ साथ ॥
आहट सुनि जुबती घर आई, देख्यौ नंदकुमार ।
सूर स्याम मंदिर अँधियारें, निरखति बारंबार ॥

Hari glanced round, and turned back to the cowherd’s dwelling;
then he thought up a ruse, and went over the back wall.

An empty house, no-one about — as though it were his own realm;
taking the pots, opening, closing ... looking for butter and curd!

Soured milk, placed to set overnight, fell into Shyam’s hands;
he took it and ate it all alone, no companion to take a share.

Hearing a sound, the herdgirl came home: she saw Nanda’s Boy;
Sur’s dark Shyam in the dark, dark house! She stares, and stares, and stares.

First, some technical details. The *pada* consists of eight lines arranged in four rhyming couplets. The metre is *Sarasī*, consisting of 16+11 *mātrās* or ‘beats’ per line; in the modern convention, the caesura after the 16th *mātrā* is marked with a comma, helpfully dividing the line into its two

component clauses, which we will call **feet A** and **B**. The first line, called either *tek* (the ‘burden’ of the song) or *sthāyī* (the ‘stable’ refrain) is short: it is the same length as an **A** foot, but rhymes with the partnered **B** foot. When sung, the *pada* may be set to *tīntāl*, a rhythmic cycle of 16 beats, neatly matching the **A** feet and hence also the entirety of the *tek*. Thus musical and literary factors go hand in hand.

So much for verse: what about poetry? We’ll go through each couplet in turn.

देखि फिरे हरि ग्वाल दुवारें ।
तब इक बुद्धि रची अपनै मन, गए नाँघि पिछवारें ॥

Hari glanced round, and turned back to the cowherd’s dwelling;
then he thought up a ruse, and went over the back wall.

Padas of this kind are free-standing, autonomous poems, even if they are grouped thematically in the manuscripts and books that house them; they have no title or heading, but may be arranged under a particular *rāga*, which may have significance for the season or time-of-day when the verse is most appropriately sung (and this in turn may reflect the daily cycle of temple ritual called *aṣṭayām sevā*, ‘service through the eight watches’). But although a *pada*’s readers or audience may have no foreknowledge of what it will contain, the five words of the *tek* immediately contextualize the setting and theme: the three items of the cowherd’s house, Hari, and his action of ‘looking back and turning’ indicate that the young Krishna is roaming along the lanes of Braj when he sees an opportunity to satisfy his perpetual thirst for the pleasures of the local milk-products – a thirst that spills over into the possibility of other pleasures, given the charm of the gopi milkmaids who churn both the butter and Krishna’s wayward heart.

Krishna’s purposeful mischief is nicely caught in line 2 by the verb *racī*, denoting a creative wiliness of mind. Equally well chosen is the verb *nāṅghi-*, which carries a sense of trespass, transgression, and crossing-the-line – a typical feature of Krishna’s asocial behaviour. (Unlike his alter ego Rama, Krishna is no model for human action, and the tradition often warns us: *Don’t try this at home!*) The unfamiliar word *nāṅghi-* is a variant on *lāṅghi-* (Hindi *lāṅhnā*); and if the sound-change seems odd, bear in mind that the phonetic similarity of /l/ and /n/ yields words such as लोट (a currency ‘note’) and the metathetical नखलऊ (the city of लखनऊ). The phrase verb *gae nāṅghi* is an inversion (common in Braj poetry) of a compound verb, and is equivalent to Hindi *lāṅgh gae*. Krishna is here designated with an honorific plural verb, though later in the poem we will see a switch to the singular, with increased intimacy of feeling.

सूनें भवन कहूँ कोउ नाहीं, मनु याही कौ राज ।
भाँड़े धरत उघारत मूँदत, दधि माखन केँ काज ॥

An empty house, no-one about — as though it were his own realm;
taking the pots, opening, closing ... looking for butter and curd!

This couplet (lines 3-4) is the narrative heart of the *pada*, and there could hardly be a subtler blending of the sublime and the lovingly comical. Sweet-toothed Krishna finds himself alone in this house, the dairy of his dreams. The little run of three imperfective participles *dharata ughārata mūdata* ('holds, opens, closes') evokes an almost cartoon-like sequence of actions — a tiptoe-tripping, Tom-and-Jerry search for curd and butter in the deserted house, picking up a pot, opening it, closing it again. (It so happens that all three of these verbs have slipped from common usage in Hindi – though मूँदना lives on in the specific context of 'to close the eyes'; thus the wording has an archaic resonance that brings a gentle gravitas to the scene.) But the childish playfulness of Krishna's butter-quest is belied by the lovely irony in *manu yāhī kau rāja*, a statement best read through the eyes of the faithful – of course it is his own kingdom, for Krishna is God and the whole of creation is his realm!

रैनि जमाइ धर्यौ हो गोरस, पर्यौ स्याम केँ हाथ ।
लै लै खात अकेले आपुन, सखा नहीं कोउ साथ ॥

Soured milk, placed to set overnight, fell into Shyam's hands;
he took it and ate it all alone, no companion to take a share.

The word *ho* may look familiar, but beware of 'false friends' – words whose meaning is not what it seems; in this context, *ho* is the old Braj equivalent of the auxiliary *thā*, so *dharyau ho* is equivalent to Hindi *dharā [huā] thā*, *rakhā [huā] thā*.

Look now at the sequence of four *o/au* vowels in *dharyau ho gorasa, paryau* (line 5); and compare it to the sequence of four *e/ai* vowels in *lai lai...akele* (line 6). The former phrase suggests a sequence of passive, 'downward' motions – the setting down of the milk, the 'falling' of it into Krishna's hands; but the contrastive latter phrase takes its tone from the energetically and joyfully repeated 'upward' motion of *lai lai* (Hindi *le lekar*), echoed in the following syllables of *akele*. The phonology perfectly reflects the situation and actions described.

आहट सुनि जुबती घर आई, देख्यौ नंदकुमार ।
सूर स्याम मंदिर अँधियारें, निरखति बारंबार ॥

Hearing a sound, the herdgirl came home: she saw Nanda's Boy;
Sur's dark Shyam in the dark, dark house! She stares, and stares, and stares.

This final couplet begins with an evocative word that is hard to translate: *āhaṭa* has no one-word equivalent to convey the sense of a footfall that betrays someone's presence, a tell-tale sound of unseen movement.

Normally in Hindi, a sequence of two actions such as 'came and saw' subordinates the first to the second by using an absolutive form of the first verb (as in line 1, *dekhi phire*, in which *dekhi* is equivalent to modern Hindi *dehkar* or *dekh*); but in line 7, the sequence 'came, saw' is expressed through two finite verbs – *āī*, *dekhyaū*, separated by the caesura. The effect is to give both actions equal weight and status, heightening the drama of the moment. She came into the house; she saw Nandkumar.

But the greatest intensity is reserved for the closing words of the last line. With his dark complexion, Krishna blends almost completely into the darkness of the house, and the girl, coming inside perhaps from a bright courtyard to investigate the sound she'd heard, can make out his form only faintly as she peers into the dark interior. She *looks and looks* – she peers *hard* (*nirakhati*), she stares and stares, trying to be sure of what she is seeing. What is she doing? She is taking *darśan* of Krishna, straining to see her perfectly beautiful lord more fully – motionless, actionless, struck silent by the sudden and tantalizing half-sight. The poet delivers a sublime metaphor for humanity's beguilingly imperfect vision of God, a through-a-glass-darkly perception of a divine presence in the world around us.

Just now I mentioned 'the closing words of the last line' – but was wrong to do so. A *pada* is a *sung* form, and its performance does not end with the last word of the literal text. (A word that lies on the page may tell the fullest truth through music!) Reaching the end of each and every line, the singer loops seamlessly back to the *ṭek*, returning to the starting point of the song and of its narrative; and it is here that the performance will eventually come to rest. The word *bārambāra* ('repeatedly, continuously'), positioned as the last word in the last line, powerfully strengthens the sense of perpetual cyclic recurrence, and helps the images of the song's vision play on and on, over and over. The girl stares and stares, *is* staring, *continues* to stare (the verb *nirakhati* is tenseless, timeless) ... she gazes and gazes ... and 'Hari glances back and turns' ... and the girl stares and stares ... and the world goes round and round and round ...