

Lidia Lewandowska-Nayar¹

NAROTTAMA DĀSA ṬHĀKURA'S HERITAGE PRESERVED

NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION

The system of Sanskrit transliteration used herein is consistent with that accepted by *International Congress of Orientalists* at Geneva in 1984. Diacritics are included.

INTRODUCTION

My PhD research explores the role of the 16th century poet Narottama Dāsa Ṭhākura in the development of Bengali Vaiṣṇavism. Bengali Vaiṣṇavism is a religious movement that regards Kṛṣṇa in his incarnation as a cowherd boy as a supreme deity. Kṛṣṇa was born in Vṛndāvana in northwest India. There he spent his childhood and youth with his associates protecting village people, killing demons and playing amorously with milkmaids (sansk. *gopīs*). One of them, his beloved Rādhā, was gradually elevated to the position of Kṛṣṇa's consort and goddess. Bengali Vaiṣṇavism is situated within the tradition of *bhakti-yoga*² – a spiritual path of love and devotion. Its basic holy scripture is *Bhāgavata-purāṇa*. Bengal Vaiṣṇavism can legitimately be called a movement because it influenced many other aspects of human life like philosophy, literature, art, architecture etc.

Narottama was one of the greatest poet-saints of medieval Bengal. The exact dates of his birth and death have not been passed down. He lived at a time when the Vaiṣṇava movement began to flourish in the Northern India. He was instrumental in spreading the doctrine throughout Bengal. His poems transcended the contemporary

¹ Lidia Lewandowska-Nayar is a first year PhD student at the Department of South Asia, School of Oriental and African Studies, London. She can be contacted at 218485@soas.ac.uk.

² The Oxford Dictionary of Hinduism (2009) defines *bhakti* as a 'generic (i.e. non-sectarian) term for a complex of religious attitudes and practices predicated on total devotion to a supreme deity with whom the devotee (bhakta) has a personal relationship. Through that deity's grace, such devotion is the principal or exclusive means to salvation, however defined. In this general sense, bhakti is now the dominant and most evident characteristic of Hinduism, if not of Indian religions in general, but the precise nature of the devotion involved, the underlying theology, and the related forms of worship all differ from tradition to tradition, and, to some extent, from individual to individual.'



canon of narrating the amorous plays of Kṛṣṇa and Rādhā. They bear a strong individual touch and express the author's love for his chosen deities, his desire to serve them and his disappointment with the material world. Narottama composed his works in the genre typical for Vaiṣṇava poetry – *pada*. A *pada* is a short poem the last line of which bearing the signature of the author. *Padas* were intended for group signing during congregational worship.

Narottama's contribution to Bengali Vaiṣṇavism has not yet been the subject of extensive academic enquiry, though his work transcends the tenets of inherited tradition. No comprehensive translation of his poetry collections has been published. Bilingual editions of the two best known collections of his poems have been published within the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) by Īśvara Dāsa (Narottama 1999 and 2000). The existing scholarship on Bengali Vaiṣṇavism focuses on the main tenets and historical development of Bengali Vaiṣṇavism as well as the movement's most famous charismatic leader, Caitanya (1486-1534).



Fig. 1 *Guru Pūja*: A devotee prostrates in front of Prabhupāda's statue. Note the text of Narottama's song displayed to the left of the sculpture.

In order to explore the significance of Narottama's work in contemporary Bengali Vaiṣṇavism I chose to study how the Hare Kṛṣṇa movement, the successors of

medieval Vaiṣṇava tradition, perceives him and preserves his legacy. For this purpose I will conduct fieldwork among Vaiṣṇava communities in Mayapur and Vṛndāvana in India as well as in the UK and Poland. As a first year research student studying part-time, however, fieldwork still lays a long way ahead of me. Meanwhile I decided to start my research here in London by exploring the significance of Narottama and his work to the devotees and guests of Hare Kṛṣṇa Temple in London at Soho Street.

OBSERVATIONS IN THE TEMPLE

The London temple was founded in 1969 by the late A.C. Bhaktivedānta Swāmi Prabhupāda (1896-1977), the founding father of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), popularly known as the 'Hare Kṛṣṇa movement'. On the occasion of the 40th anniversary a weeklong commemorative festival (15–22 November 2009) was organised. Some of the closest disciples of Prabhupāda were going to arrive for the celebrations. They had directly collaborated with Prabhupāda to set up temples in various parts of the world, including London.

On 4 November 2009 I paid my first visit to the temple. I attended the deity worship (*ārati*) and participated in the congregational singing of devotional songs (*bhājan*).³ After the service I explored the temple, walked around, chatted to devotees and bought the *Temple Song Book* in the shop.

During this first visit I observed the following:

- Every devotee I talked to was familiar with Narottama's songs and respected him as a great Vaiṣṇava poet-saint.
- The temple shop stocked books and other materials that contained works by Narottama. Among them were

³ The Oxford Dictionary of Hinduism (2009) defines *bhājans* as 'devotional hymn[s], or collection[s] of hymns, usually sung collectively ... Singing bhajans is the principal mode of worship among bhakti [see fn. 3] sects in many regions of India. The hymns are often the work of medieval bhakti poet-saints ... and they are frequently accompanied by music. [...] These are perhaps more usually, but not exclusively, Vaiṣṇava in orientation: bhajans addressed to Kṛṣṇa or to Rāma being particularly popular. These frequently take the form of a continuous repetition of the deity's name or names. In the 20th century cassettes and CDs of bhajans have become popular with Hindu communities across the world, and the professionals who sing them attract a similar kind of attention to that enjoyed by pop or film stars.'

- The bilingual English-Bengali editions of the two best-known collections of his poems: the *Prārthanā* (Narottama: 1999) and the *Śrī Prema Bhakti-candrikā* (Narottama: 2000);
- Steven Rosen's (1991) volume on *The Lives of the Vaishnava Saints: Shrinivas Acharya, Narottama Das Ṭhākura, Shyamananda Pandit*. It was available in hardcover and Audio CD;
- The *Songs of the Vaiṣṇava Ācāryas*, a complete collection of hymns and mantras translated by Prabhupāda and published in 2006 by Bhaktivedānta Book Trust International. The volume contains altogether thirteen songs by Narottama, eleven from the *Prārthanā*, one from the *Śrī Prema Bhakti-candrikā* as well as two others not associated with any of the canonical collections.
- The *Temple Song Book*. The book was published by the Radha-Krishna Temple of ISKCON in London. Its contents have been taken from the *Songs of the Vaishnava Acaryas*. The book contains four songs by Narottama:
 - *Śrī Guru-vandanā* or *Reverence for the Spiritual Teacher* (ISKCON nd: 24-25). This song has been taken from the Bengali-English edition of the *Śrī Prema Bhakti-candrikā* collection (Narottama 2000: 27-33). There it is titled *Śrī Guru Mahimā* or *Glories of the Spiritual Master*. It, however, appears under the same name in another collection of hymns, the *Songs of the Vaishnava Acaryas* (Prabhupāda: 2006).
 - *Nāma-saṅkīrtana* or *Chanting the Holy Name* (ISKCON nd: 39-41). This song is not included in either of the two famous collections. Prabhupāda attributed the song to Narottama. He suggested that '[t]his song of Śrīla Narottama Dāsa Ṭhākura is very famous among devotees in Bengal and Orissa' (quoted at Bhagavata.com nd.).
 - *Sapārṣada-bhagavad-viraha-janīta-vilāpa* or *Lamentation Due to Separation from the Lord and His Associates* (ISKCON nd: 42-43). This song is included in the *Prārthanā* collection (Narottama 1999: 102-103, No. 40).
 - *Savarana-śrī-gaura-pada-padme* or *A Prayer to the Lotus Feet of Śrī Gaurāṅga* (ISKCON nd: 3-45). The song is included in the *Prārthanā* collection (Narottama: 1999: 94-98, No. 38) under the title *Sāvaraṇa-Gaura-mahimā* or *The Glories of Lord Gaurāṅga*.

Narottama's songs are regularly performed in the temple. *Śrī Guru-vandanā* is sung every day at 7.05 a.m. during the *Guru Pūja* ritual (worship of the spiritual master) honouring Prabhupāda. Its text is displayed on the spreadsheet in front of

Prabhupāda's statue. When I arrived at the temple in the morning to attend the *Guru Pūja* the temple was well attended and devotees were singing Narottama's song. They were dancing in front of Prabhupāda's statue, emotionally touched by feelings of love and devotion for their spiritual master. *Sapārṣada-bhagavad-viraha-janita-vilāpa* is performed as a part of collective ritual practice during bereavement after a devotee passed away.

This might suggest that Narottama forms much more a living part of the contemporary Vaiṣṇava tradition than other poets of his time and the famous Six Gosvāmins, the authors of the Vaiṣṇava doctrine.



Fig. 2 *Guru Pūja*: Devotees singing Narottama's songs. Note Radhanatha Swami on the right

NAROTTAMA'S SONGS IN THE HARE KṚṢṆA MOVEMENT

One devotee (pers. comm. 15 November 2009) explained that to understand most scriptures by the Gosvāmins a higher than average level of spiritual development was required. The aim of ISKCON was to spread Krishna consciousness as far and wide as possible. For this purpose they selected media to convey their message that appealed to the devotees on an emotional and spiritual rather than intellectual level.

The songs of Narottama expressed his personal feelings for the deities he chose to worship and his desire to serve them. They thus seemed ideally suited to encourage devotees to establish a personal and emotional relation with Kṛṣṇa. This, she explained, was the primary aim of spiritual practice.

Prabhupāda held the following view on Narottama's songs:

'The prayers of Narottama Dāsa Ṭhākura [their] sound is above the material platform. It is directly from the spiritual platform. And there is no need of understanding the language. It is just like a thunder burst. Everyone can hear the sound of thunder-there is no misunderstanding. Similarly, these songs are above the material platform, and they crack like thunder within your heart.'
(quoted by Gosvāmī 1982: 48)

Prabhupāda believed that 'there is so much deep meaning in Narottama's prayers' (Gosvāmī: 1982: 48-49). His favourite song by Narottama was *Hari Hari viphale*. In this song Narottama laments how he wasted his birth as a human - according to the Hindu principle of reincarnation a rare occasion the soul's circle of life and death - because he failed to worship Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa.

RADHANATA SWAMI

During my second visit to the temple on 8 November 2009 I officially introduced myself. Learning of my particular interest in Narottama and his relevance for the contemporary Kṛṣṇa movement, one of the spiritually advanced devotees advised me to meet one particular spiritual master. Radhanatha Swami was coming to attend the festival. I was told he could talk for hours about his beloved poet Narottama. As the master was going to be very busy, my informant advised me to arrange an interview with him in advance. During the festival I kept inquiring in the temple when Radhanatha Swami was going to arrive. Nobody knew. He may come anytime. Nobody knew whether he was going to speak in public during this festival.

Meanwhile I did some research online. On his personal website (Swami 2009) I learned that Swami is one of ISKCON's most influential religious leaders. He was born in the United States in 1951. In 1970 he left for India in search of spiritual knowledge. There he lived for several years as a renunciate and wandering monk.

Eventually he attached himself to the founder of the Hare Kṛṣṇa movement, Prabhupāda. He entered the contemporary, active path of *bhakti* (devotional yoga).⁴ Its guiding principle calls followers actively reduce suffering in the world. He is currently based at Radha Gopinath Temple in Chowpatty, Mumbai where he runs social development and charity projects. He also travels extensively throughout Europe and America. In 2008 he published his autobiography *The Journey Home*. Swami arrived in the middle of the week. He gave no public lecture but only opened and closed the main ceremonies with some prayers. On Wednesday 25 November 2009 I finally interviewed him. The following is an excerpt from the interview conducted at the Radha-Krishna Temple in London, Soho Street. The interview was recorded and subsequently transcribed.

INTERVIEW WITH RADHANATHA SWAMI (Excerpt)

L: As I see, in this temple people sing Narottama's songs every day.

RS: Yes, we have about 400 temples throughout the world, where people sing Narottama's songs in the morning during *Guru Pūja*. Also, our individual *bhājans* and *kirtāns*⁵ include songs of Narottama. Our Guru Prabhupāda and his Guru Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati [1874–1937] also paid great respect to him.



Fig. 3 Radhanatha Swami

⁴ The Oxford Dictionary of Hinduism (2009) defines *bhakti* as a 'g... complex of religious attitudes and practices predicated on total de... the devotee (bhakta) has a personal relationship. Through that... principal or exclusive means to salvation, however defined. In this general sense, bhakti is now the dominant and most evident characteristic of Hinduism, if not of Indian religions in general, but the precise nature of the devotion involved, the underlying theology, and the related forms of worship all differ from tradition to tradition, and, to some extent, from individual to individual.'

⁵ According to the Oxford Dictionary of Hinduism (2009) *kirtāns* are '[s]ongs sung collectively in praise of Kṛṣṇa. This practice is particularly popular in the bhakti culture of Gaudīya (Bengal) Vaiṣṇavism; the model was provided by Caitanya who organized and participated in the collective singing of kīrtanas about Kṛṣṇa's life with the gopīs in Vrndāvana, and the erotic love between Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa. Such singing induced ecstatic trances in Caitanya himself, during which he was effectively possessed by the god.'

L: Why are Narottama's songs so popular?

RS: Narottama's songs are so comprehensive that they include the essence of the whole Vedic philosophy and are sung in a very common Bengali language that anyone can understand. They present the philosophy of *bhakti* with pure, ecstatic devotion and all our teachers accept that. Dozens of Narottama's songs were recorded, translated and explained by Prabhupāda.

L: Can I join a pilgrimage to the Narottama's birth place?

RS: I think so. The birthplace of Narottama, Kheturi village, is now in Bangladesh. Two years ago I went there with a pilgrimage. We took 4000 people.

L: Is there any Narottama temple or shrine in Kheturi?

RS: The places that are marked are his shrine, [his] temple [and] the place where he was taking his ritual bath. His house is marked but empty. There is also a tree, under which he used to sit and sing his *bhājans*. And a place called *prem-tali* at the bank of the Padma river. There is a story that just before Narottama was born Caitanya went to Ramakeli to the other bank of the river, looked at the direction of Kheturi and started crying 'Narottama, Narottama!' He went into Padma river and deposited his own love (*prema*⁶) in the river and told the goddess of Padma that when Narottama comes you should give him my love. The goddess of Padma asked: 'How will I know who this person is?' Lord Caitanya said: 'When he comes you will naturally overflow.' When Narottama was a teenager Lord Caitanya appeared again in his dream and told him to take a bath in Padma river. When he did it the river overflowed and Narottama was filled with Caitanya's love. His dark complexion became golden.

L: Have any of Narottama's manuscripts been preserved?

RS: There is something, but I am not sure where ... His disciples made hundreds of copies but during Muslim invasions most of the manuscripts and all deities from Kheturi were either taken to India or destroyed. One set of deities Rādhā-Braj Mohan is in the temple in Vṛndāvana, some manuscripts might be there ... And there is a research library there with a lot of originals. There is another place in India, Gamvila in West Bengal, Murshidabad district, where the main disciple of Narottama, Ganga Narayana Cakravarti lived. The golden statue of Lord Caitanya from Narottama's temple was taken out to Gamvila. Descendants of Cakravarti may have some manuscripts as well.

⁶ 'The highest form of the love of God in Hinduism, comparable to para-bhakti, described as the desperate longing as of a drowning person for air. However, this condition is permanent and cannot be taken away' (Oxford Dictionary of Hinduism 2009).

L: Do you think Narottama's songs are for devotees only?

RS: Narottama's songs carry universal values, which can be understood by all people, also Christians beyond sectarian presentation. Christian mystics like St. Francis of Assisi [and] St. John of the Cross found the very ecstatic mood similar to that typical for *bhakti*. To the degree we have faith and devotion and are sincere in our hearts we can understand Narottama's songs. I don't mean just intellectual understanding but spiritual realization. Some songs are simple, more appropriate for the general public because they teach the qualities, character of a devotee, they can lift people up. But some of them are expressions of his divine ecstasy and those are for more perfected souls.

L: Thank you very much. Can I take a photo of you?

RS: Whatever makes you happy. It was wonderful talking to you. We will be in touch.

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FIGURES

All photographs are the authors. Permission to publish the photographs was granted by Radhanatha Swami (15 March 2010).

Fig. 4 *Guru Pūja*: A devotees prostrates in front of Prabhupāda's statue.

Fig. 5 *Guru Pūja*: Devotees singing Narottama's songs.

Fig. 6 Radhanatha Swami.