

MY SWEET LORD

DEVOTION IN MEDIEVAL INDIA

ANS 372, RS 341

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TTH 9.30–11.00, MEZ 1.120

Fall 2009

This course is about devotional religion – a central element of Indian culture and a major part of the life experience of contemporary India. Our main focus will be on North Indian bhakti traditions, which we will study by reading translations of devotional poetry in its historical and cultural context. The core of the syllabus will be the poetry of Tulsidas, Surdas, Mirabai, Kabir, and other medieval poets whose work continues to inspire and delight modern readers and audiences. While most of our sources will be selected from the pre-modern literatures of languages such as Hindi, Punjabi and Bengali, our search for the roots of these literary traditions will also lead us back to Sanskrit texts such as the *Bhagavata Purana* and the *Gita* *govinda*, and we will also look at seminal Alvar poetry from the Tamil culture of southern India.

Major themes and issues will include: aesthetics and poetics; literary genres; poetry & painting; hagiography; textual transmission &

historicity; the translator's lens; literacy & orality; music, performance & recital styles; the sectarian milieu; temple and private worship, and the lives of the saintly. We will also examine the three postulates of the course title (borrowed from a song by George Harrison): “MY” – the *personal* connection inherent in devotionalism; “SWEET” – the role of aesthetics and sentiment in devotional attitudes; and “LORD” – perceptions of dependence and divine majesty.

Students with some knowledge of the religious and cultural “map” of India will be best positioned to benefit from this course; students who know Hindi will find opportunities to read some Hindi texts. The essential prerequisite, however, is an energetic interest in the subject and a desire to study a wide range of primary literature.

PRINCIPAL TEXTS (available from the Coop)

Edwin F. Bryant, ed. *Krishna: a sourcebook*. Oxford & New York: OUP, 2007.

Vinay Dharwadker, trans., *Kabir: the weaver's songs*. Delhi: Penguin, 2003.

J.S. Hawley & Mark Juergensmeyer, *Songs of the saints of India*. Delhi: OUP, 2004.

A.K. Ramanujan, trans., *Speaking of Siva*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973.

The **COURSE BOOKLET** is available from Paradigm Books 407 W. 24th Street.

GRADING

Participation in class discussion	20%
4 short "reaction papers" @ 5%	20%
Two essays @ 15% (13 October & 17 November)	30%
Final take-home exam	30%

Regular quizzes will test students' assimilation of weekly readings and class discussion; performance in these quizzes will affect the participation grade. Students should keep track of their grades as the course progresses, and are welcome to discuss any concerns in office hours.

ESSAYS

Each of the two essays should be approximately 4 to 5 pages of double-spaced type. Please submit printouts, not online. *You are strongly encouraged to discuss drafts with me at least one week before submission date: this can be done in office hours, or by appointment, or by email.*

Essay 1: Due Tuesday 13 October.

What contribution did the *Bhagavata Purana* and the *Gita Govinda* make to the development of Krishna-devotion?

Essay 2: Due Tuesday 17 November.

Explain the distinction between *nirgun* and *sagun* bhakti in Hinduism, illustrating your answer with examples from the poetry studied in class.

Course schedule

1 **27th August. OVERVIEW: SYLLABUS & PROCEDURES.**

Why “My Sweet Lord”? What is “devotion”? What is poetry? What are our sources? What assumptions are embedded in them, and in us as observers? And a Surdas *bhajan*.

2 **1st & 3rd September. WHAT IS SANCTITY?**

Vaishnav bhakti: encounters with divine grace. Two Sanskrit texts: the sacred *Bhagavata Purana* and the sacred-erotic *GitaGovinda*.

3 **8th & 10th September. GRASSROOTS: VERNACULAR TRADITIONS.**

Mapping the themes, genres and regional characteristics of devotional literature of Indian vernacular languages.

4 **15th & 17th September. THE VISION OF THE BLIND: SURDAS, THE KRISHNA POET.** The themes, styles and controversial history of the anthology known as the *Sursagar*, “Sur’s ocean”. What streams have contributed to its growth over the centuries?

5 **22nd & 24th September. SURDAS AND THE PUSHTIMARG: THE PATH OF GRACE.**

Surdas is traditionally regarded as one of the “Ashtachhap”, a group of 8 singer-poets highly regarded in the Pushtimarg (*aka* the Vallabha sampraday). We shall encounter the sect and Sur’s alleged association with it.

6 **29th September & 1st October. MIRA, HIT HARIVANSH, RASKHAN, NANDDAS.**

These four 16th-century poets – contemporaries of Surdas – brought diverse literary and theological perspectives to their poetry. What unites them, and what distinguishes them from each other?

7 **6th & 8th October. KRISHNA BHAKTI IN PRACTICE.**

Temple rituals and performances; the shrine; *seva* & *puja*; pilgrimage; priesthood; *darshan*; rules of conduct for the devotee.

8 **13th & 15th October. THE RAMAYANA TRADITION.**

An overview of the “many Ramayanas” of South Asia, from Valmiki to modern televised versions of the narrative; comparison of key episodes.

- 9 **20th & 22th October. TULSIDAS.**
The standing and achievement of the greatest vernacular poet of North India. Three primary texts: *Ramcharitmanas*, *Kavitavali* and *Vinay Patrika*. Is Tulsi's Rama narrative "a good story spoiled"? Belief & doubt; faith & literalism.
- 10 **27th & 29th October. POETRY: READ, LISTEN, EXPERIENCE.**
The matter of **style, aesthetics, *rasa*, genre, rhetoric, form, meter, music**: do we lose all this and invent a new literature when we translate texts into English?
- 11 **3rd & 5th November. KABIR: WEAVER OF MEANING.**
Alongside the sagun traditions of Krishna-bhakti and Rama-bhakti, poets such as Kabir envisioned God as an abstract entity, to be perceived within rather than through the narratives of avatars.
- 12 **10th & 12th November. NIRGUN AND SAGUN DISTINCTIONS.**
A close look at the traditional bifurcation of "qualified" and "non-qualified" approaches to God. *Class guest, Thursday 12th: Professor J.S. Hawley, University of Columbia.*
- 13 **17th & 19th November. THE SANT TRADITION.**
Guru Nanak and Sikh faith; Sundardas and the Dadupanth.
- 14 **24th & 26th November. THE MEANING OF SAINTLY LIVES.**
Biography and hagiography: *what* and *how* do we know about people from the past? History, tradition, charismatics, miracles; variant interpretations of narrative meaning.
- 15 **1st & 3rd December. SOUTHERN TRADITIONS.**
The Virashaiva and Alvar traditions of South India.