

## INDIAN DEVOTIONAL POETRY

*Riding the blue sapphire mountains  
wearing moonstone for slippers  
blowing long horns  
O Śiva  
when shall I  
crush you on my pitcher breasts*

*O lord white as jasmine  
when do I join you  
stripped of body's shame  
and heart's modesty?*

Mahadevi-akka, 12th-century Kannada, trans. A.K. Ramanujan

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From the 6th through 18th centuries, Indian poet-singers in vernacular languages produced passionate poetry directed at God but exploring human feeling and thought in wide-ranging, nuanced ways. They sang of separation and union, fear, anger, and longing. They sang of delusion and despair, liberation and joy. They spoke with startling intimacy and immediacy. To study this poetry is to learn about *bhakti* or devotion, central to Indian religions from the early centuries CE to the present. The great poets of this movement became major figures in their regional literatures and are still extremely popular. The efflorescence of *bhakti* poetry in South India occurred during the 6th-12th centuries; in North India, during the 14th-18th centuries. The latter period includes poetry of Sufism, the Islamic mysticism that interacted with Hindu *bhakti* in North India. Our course introduces the poetry, poets, gods, stories, arts, practices, sects, and social influence of *bhakti* traditions. We will read the poems closely, learn about doctrines and narratives that inform them, listen to examples of musical renditions, and discover the depths of human experience that they explore. In one case, we will see how a text is interpreted in dance

Much of our class discussion will be poetry-centered, exploring the poems as literature/ music/ performance/ religious expression/ interpretation of tradition. Close readings will illuminate styles and techniques of poets; psychology of *bhakti*; religious goals, practices, and doctrines. Some lectures will provide historical and social background, and some readings will introduce historical and critical issues.

The selections offered on this syllabus are limited by the short time we have together. Some very great and important languages, regions, deities, and traditions are omitted but can be taken up in individual research projects.

### **Books**

[Note: We are a small class and I would like you to order the two required books from an online source—or read from the copy of each book that I will put on reserve. If you have any trouble getting the *Gitagovinda* and want your own copy, I can photocopy and charge you the cost.]

*Love Song of the Dark Lord: Jayadeva's Gitagovinda*. Barbara S. Miller. Columbia Univ. Press, 1977.  
(Amazon currently has 4 copies of 2004 edition for \$13.95. There are also used copies. Main ed. is \$27.)

*God on the Hill: Temple Poems from Tirupati*, trans. Velcheru Narayana Rao and David Shulman. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005. (New is \$21.95 on Amazon. There are also used copies, for \$7-10 + \$4 shipping.)

Reader distributed in class

### Schedule of assignments

(All materials are in Reader except the two books listed above.)

#### April

2 Opening

7 From *Poems to Siva: Hymns to the Tamil Saints*, Indira Viswanathan Peterson. Sel. poems  
+ Intro 3-24, 50-75 ®

4/9 From *Speaking of Siva*, trans. A.K. Ramanujan. Intro + sel. poems of Basvanna & Mahadevi-akka. ®

14 Nammalvar and the Tamil Vaisnava tradition. (1) *Hymns for the Drowning: Poems for Visnu by Nammalvar*, trans. & intro by A.K. Ramanujan. Preface ix-xvii + sel. poems. (2) Vasudha Narayanan, "With the Earth as a Lamp and the Sun as a Flame: Lighting Devotion in South India." *International Journal of Hindu Studies* 11.3 (2007), 227-53. ®

Included in Reader and recommended, but too much to assign in one day: Ramanujan's Afterword, 103-57, 166-69.

16 Discussion of research topics. Your assignment is to browse through all the remaining readings on the syllabus and read at least something from each. LH will provide a list of potential areas of research and examples of sources.

21 From *Krishna: The Beautiful Legend of God—Srimad Bhagavata Purana, Book X*. Trans & intro Edwin F. Bryant. New York: Penguin, 2004. Sels. from intro and text.

23 Jayadeva's *Gita Govinda*, pp. 3-37, 69-85  
In class film: *Given to Dance*. (ZDVD 11849)

28 Jayadeva's *Gita Govinda*, pp. 86-125

30 *God on the Hill: Temple Poems from Tirupati*, trans. Velcheru Narayana Rao and David Shulman. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005. (page numbers TBA)

#### May

5 *God on the Hill*, cont.

7 Surdas & Krishna *bhakti* traditions in the Hindi region.

(1) From *Poems to the Child-God: Structures and Strategies in the Poetry of Surdas* by Kenneth E. Bryant. Univ. Of Calif. Press, 1978. pp. 147-80.

(2) From *Sur Das: Poet, Singer, Saint*. John S. Hawley. Seattle: Univ. of Washington Press, 1984. pp. 3-33

12 Surdas & Krishna *bhakti* traditions in the Hindi region, cont.

(1) *Poems to the Child-God*, pp. 181-209.

(2) Shandip Saha. "The Movement of *Bhakti* along a North-West Axis: Tracing the History of the Pustimarg between the Sixteenth and Nineteenth Centuries." *International Journal of Hindu Studies* 11.3 (2007), 299-318.

14 Krishna as lover in Bengal: Sel. poetry & intro from *In Praise of Krishna: Songs from the Bengali*, trans. Edward Dimock and Denise Levertov, intro by Dimock. Univ. of Chicago Press, 1981 (orig. pub. 1967)

19 Christian Lee Novetzke. "Bhakti and its Public." *International Journal of Hindu Studies* 11.3 (2007), 255-72.

21-26-28 Kabir and the *nirgun* tradition in North India. Written, oral, and musical traditions. Readings TBA. This is based on LH's work and will include one film and a lot of music.

## **June**

2 & 4 student presentations and parting

### **Requirements**

1. Research project in two parts, due Fri. May 2 (5-7 pp) and Fri. June 6 (8-10 pp). The two parts can remain separate or can be combined in a final paper of 13-17 pp. After you get a research topic, read two important sources outside our syllabus on your topic. Report on these in the first paper. What's in them? What are the main questions, methods, organization, strengths and weaknesses of each? How do they compare with each other and with our class readings? What questions do they cause you to want to explore? Then in the final paper take up the question/s that grab you, adding more sources.
2. Attendance and participation – very important. Participation will include general discussion and assigned moments when you comment on something from the reading.
3. Oral presentation on your work, last two days of class (not graded—for all our enjoyment).

### **Grading**

Attendance & participation	30%.
First paper	30%
Final paper	40%