

Vaishnavism as Fine Literature

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The Literary – and Vaishnava? – Excellence of Surdas

A striking feature of the reception of the great Brajhasha poet Surdas was the effort in the course of the eighteenth century to reformat his oeuvre in such a way that it followed the pattern of the Bhāgavata Purāṇa. Why do this? To make him appear more archetypally Vaishnava or a better representative of that which is literarily “fine” – and of course Sanskrit? Or both? Moving beyond my essay “Did Surdas Perform the Bhāgavata-purāṇa?” (2015), I will consider examples of Sur’s literary craftsmanship in several characteristic genres (bhramargīt, nindāstuti, stotra, rāmāyaṇa, nakh-śikh) and ask what makes them “fine.” How important is it to have Sanskrit aesthetic theory in the back of one’s mind – or the example of “classic” Vaishnava texts? Could these be distractions?