॥ सूर सोरही ॥

SIXTEEN PADAS FROM THE SURSAGAR
TRANSLATED BY RUPERT SNEILL AND ARUNA KHAROD

HINDI URDU FLAGSHIP
DEPARTMENT OF ASIAN STUDIES
UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN
Sixteen padas from the Sūrsāgar
translated by Rupert Snell and Aruna Kharod

The text that has come to be known as the Sūrsāgar is a fine, much-loved anthology of Braj Bhāṣā devotional verse devoted to Krishna. Its oldest layers are attributable to the poet Sūrdās, said to have lived in the Braj region in the first half of the 16th century. Little is known about Sūr’s outer life; but hagiography rushed in where history feared to tread, depicting him as a disciple of the great theologian Vallabha (AD 1479-1531), and ‘canonizing’ his beautiful padas at the very heart of Vallabhite sevā or ritual service.

Such was the spiritual and aesthetic allure of Sūr’s poems that they were widely emulated by later poets, who expanded his corpus of a few hundred padas into a true ‘ocean’ of several thousand. That wise old editor, Tradition, brought a basic cohesion to the Sūrsāgar despite its hybrid origins; and scribes lovingly copied huge numbers of manuscripts, helping the parallel oral tradition to bring ‘poems by Sūrdās’ to a spellbound devotional world.

Because the Sūrsāgar is loosely structured, with each pada an independent poem, redactors and anthologists have always felt free to cherry-pick selections from it according to their needs. We have followed suit in the selection below, selecting sixteen padas as the basis for what we hope is a new style of English rendering. (Incidentally, we have removed all English-derived punctuation from the Braj text, where such impositions can constrict multivalency of meaning.) The texts are followed by notes and by a discussion of the principles that have guided our attempts at translation.

RS & AK
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I’ve lost so many days paying Hari no heed,
Relishing sweet slurs on my fellows in life after wasted life.
I’ve anointed my desires with oil, rubbed my clothes spotless,
And gone about as a swami, tilak on brow, seeking the sensual.
Fearsome Time makes the whole world tremble and the great gods weep:
What then of wretched Sur, who would fill his belly and lie down to sleep?
आगिए ब्रजराज कुंवर कमल कुसुम फूले।
कुमुद बुंद संकुचित भए भुंग लता फूले॥
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सूर स्याम प्रात उठी अंबज कर धारी॥ २॥

Awake, young prince of Braj! For the day-lily blooms,
Night’s lotus shyly wanes, bee-vines sway in the breeze.
Hear the rooster, the birdsong loud in the lofty trees,
As a lowing cow hurries after her calf in the cattle-pen.
The moon is dulled by the lustrous sun as Braj women sing:
Sur’s lord Gopal, who bears a lotus in his hand, is risen at dawn.
जागौ जागौ हो गोपाल।
ना हिं इतौ सोइयत सुनि सुत प्रात् परम सुनि काल।
फिर फिर जात निरखि मुख छिड़ि छिड़ि मध्य गोपिन के बाल।
विन विकसे कल कमल कोष तें मनु मधुपनि की माल।
जो तुम मोहि त पत्याहू सूर प्रभु सुंदर स्याम तमाल।
तो तुम्हीं देखौ आपुन वजि नित्रा मैन रिमाल॥ ॥

Awake, awake, my son Gopal!
It isn’t right to sleep so much at the blessèd hour of dawn.
The cowherd boys peep at your face and sadly turn back home.
Like lines of bees who find the lotus bud is yet to bloom.
You doubt me, lovely lord of Sur, fine as a dark-limbed tree?
Then cast off sleepiness and open wide your eyes to see!
Hari sings softly to himself in the courtyard;
His tender little feet stir into a dance that charms his heart.
The dark, the fair: a raised arm beckons as he calls the cows;
Now he calls for Nand, now he wanders into the house.
Tiny hands take some butter and put it into his tiny mouth;
When he sees his reflection in a pillar he feeds it sweet handfuls.
Secretly savoring his play, Yashoda is filled with delight:
The wonder of Syam’s childhood—endlessly Sur cherishes this sight!
राग मौरी

गए स्याम तिंहि स्वालिन के घर।
देखी द्वार नहीं कोई इत उठ चिते चले तब भीतर॥
इतर आवत गोपी जब जानी आपून रही छपाई।
सुनि सदन मथनियों के डिग बैठि रहें अरगाइ॥
माखन भरी कमोरी देखत ले ले नागे खान।
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तुमहि देति में अति मुख पायो तम जिय कहा विचारत॥
सुनि सुनि बात स्याम के मुख की उमरिण हँसी ब्रजनारी।
सूरदास प्रभू निरखि स्वालि मुख तब भजि चले मुरारी॥५॥

Syam went to the door of that cowherd girl;
Seeing no-one at home, he glanced around and stepped inside.
The gopi felt his presence and stayed hidden in the shadows
As he crouched alone by the churns in the empty house,
While feasting from a brimming butter-pot he’d found,
He saw himself in the jeweled pillar, and smartly spoke.
“Today’s my first time a-stealing; it’s good to have you along!”
He ate, and fed his pillar-friend, who dropped the butter. “What’s up?
“I’ll give you the whole pot if you like! It’s so sweet—why waste it?
“Sharing with you gives me great joy… what’s in your mind?”
The gopi laughed elatedly to hear all this from young Syam’s lips:
He saw her there and ran away, the lord of Sur, the demon-slayer!
राग कान्हरी ॥

स्याम कहा चाहत से डोलत ।
पृढ़े तै पुम बदन दुरावत सूढ़े बोल न बोलत ॥
पाए आई अकेले घर में दंश भाजन में हाथ ।
अब तुम काहू नाउँ लेजै नाहिन कोऊ साथ ॥
मैं जानौ यह मेरो घर है ता धोखे में आई ।
देखत ही मोरस में छौटौ काटू कौ कर नायौ ॥
सुनि मूढ़ बजत निरिख मुख मोभा व्यालिनि मुरि मुसुकानी ।
सूर स्याम तुम ही अति नागर बात तिहारी जानी ॥ ६ ॥

Syam, what do you crave as you roam about?
When I ask, you hide your face and give no straight reply.
I’ve caught you alone in the house, your hand in the curd-pot;
Who do you plan to blame this time? There’s no-one here but you!
“I thought this was my house, I was muddled, and in I came;
Then I saw an ant in the curd, so I just reached in to save him!”
These sweet words and his lovely look made her turn away and smile:
Sur’s Syam, you may be very clever, but I’ve seen through your guile!
गोपाल दुरे हैं माखन खात।
देखि सखी मोहा जु बनी है स्याम मनोहर गात।
उठ अबलोकिए ओट ठाड़े हैं जिहि बिधि हैं लखि लेन।
ज़बिल नैन जूह दिमि चितवत और सखि का रेत।
सुंदर कर आनन समीप अति राजन इहि आकार।
ज़लह हनी ओर बिहु सौं तजि मिलत जय उपहार।
गिरि गिरि परत बदन हैं उर पर हैं दधसुत के बिहु।
मानहुं सुभम सुधाकर वरषत प्रियजन आयम इंदु।
बाल विनोद बिलोकि सूर प्रभु मिथिल भई ब्रज नारि।
पुरे न बजन बरिज़वे कारन रहीं विचारे विचारे।

Gopal is eating butter on the sly!
Look, dear friend, how his dark and charming form becomes him.
Behold him, standing hidden—see how he peeks and steals,
Glancing smartly all around as he feeds his friends their prize,
His lily hands and a bright round face—an image comes to mind
Of lotuses touching the moon, fêting their former foe!
His lips drip milky droplets to his breast as precious pearls
Or blissful beads of nectar rained from a meeting-lovers’ moon.
Seeing Sur’s young lord at play, the gopis’ minds are stilled:
Their chiding words all left unsaid, they’re lost in thought.
What is he like, this Kanhai, this son of Nand?
He ever dwells in Braj, and so I’ve never seen him face to face.
There’s something I’m too shy to say, it can’t be said aloud;
This longing’s crept into my mind—just find a way to show me him.
He’s said to be so beautiful...please let me see him now..."
Her friend was much confused by Radha’s words, O Sur!
Enquires dark Syam, “And who are you, fair girl?
“Your father’s name? And where’s your home? I haven’t seen you in our lane.”
“Why would I take the road to Braj? I simply play at my own door—
And there I hear the latest tales of butter-thefts by Nanda’s lad.”
“What can I steal of yours? Come on, let’s play as partners in the game!”
The king of lovers, Sur’s own lord, beguiles young Radha with his words.
राग सारंग

गई वृषभानुमुना अपने घर।
संग सबी सीं कहति जनी यह को जैंं हं इतने दर।
बड़ी बेवर भई जमुना आए बीजति दाईं मैया।
बचन कहति मुख हृदय प्रेम हुह मन हरि लियो कहतेया।
माता कहति कहाँ ही प्यारी कहाँ अबर लाई।
सूरदास तब कहति राधिका बरिक देखि हाँ आई।
॥ १० ॥

Vrishabhanu’s daughter sets off home;
To her friends a parting word: “Who’d go to his place anyway?
“We’ve lingered long at Yamuna’s bank, and Ma will fret—”
Lips speak, but mind still longs for Kanha who stole her heart.
Says Mother then, “Where were you, dear? What held you back till now?
Sur, this is Radha’s quick reply: “I just slipped out to check the cows…”

॥ सूर सोरंही ॥
राग खलाबल

घरहैं जाति मन हरप बढ़यो।
दुख डाक्की मुख अंग भार भर चली लूट सौ पायो।
भीम सकोरति चलत भर गति नैकु बदन मुसुकायो।
तहें इक सखी मिली राधा की कहति भयो मन भायो।
कुंज भवन हरि संग बिलसि रस मन की मुफ़्त करायो।
सूर मुखध चुरावनहारी कैसें हरत हुरायो।

She sets off home with gladdened mind;
Discarding grief, she bears a fulsome freight of stolen joys.
Slowly she walks, with puckered brow and tiny smile;
“Radha”, a friend observes, “Your cherished hope has come to be!
“The thrill of Hari’s arbour bliss fulfills your heart;
“And he, who steals love’s fragrance, Sur, won’t be concealed!”
राग कल्यान

गोकुलनाथ विराजत डोल।
संग लिये बुधभानुंदिनी पहिरे सील निचोल॥
कंचन खचित लाल मनि मोती हीरा जटित अमोल॥
झुलवहि जूब मिले ब्रजमुंदरि हरपित करति कलोल॥
खेलति हृदसति परस्पर माहति बोलति मीठे बोल।
सूरदास स्वामी पिया प्यारी झूलत हैं झकझोल॥ १२॥

Gokul's lord adorns the swing,
Enthroned with Vrishabhanu’s daughter clad in sapphire blue.
Their golden seat is set with rubies, diamonds, priceless pearls:
Braj beauties push them in delight and fill the air with cries of joy.
Teasing each other and smiling, they sing, they speak sweet words;
Lover and lady, lord of Surdas, side by side swing back and forth.
राग सरद सरद
सरद समे हूँ स्याम न आए।
को जाने कहें ते सजनी किहि बैरिनि विरमाए॥
अमल अकास काम कुसुमित छिद्रि लच्छन स्वच्छ जनाए॥
सर भरता सागर जल उज्ज्वल अति कुल जमल सुहाए॥
अहि मयंक मकरंद केज अलि दाहक गरत जिवाए॥
प्रीतम रंग संग मिलि सुंदर रचि मचि मीचि मिराए॥
सूनी बेज तुषार जमत चिर विरह सिधु उपजाए॥
अब गइ आस सूर मिलबे को भए ब्रजनाथ पराए॥ १३॥

Though autumn’s here, still Syam’s not come;
Some unknown rival, friend, has somehow held him home.
Tall grasses flower, and a perfect sky shows all things fair;
Lush lilies throng clear ponds and streams and waters wide.
A serpent moon arouses lotus-bees with burning pollen-bane —
My lover’s with some belle, teasing and pleasing her, cooling her desire.
A frosty cold has gripped my empty bed and I drift in loneliness;
My hope of meeting’s gone, O Sur, for Braj’s Lord’s no longer mine.
This is no season, please, for angry pride,
As rainclouds quench the thirsting earth and lovers meet in joy!
The creepers scorched by summer’s sun now cling to trees,
Once-withered streams flow foaming full to meet the sea.
Short-lived is youth — the shadow of a scrap of cloud:
Consider wisely what I’ve said about true love’s ways!
Take this to heart, dear Radhika, and take my arm:
Arise, my friend, and come with Surdas to your lover’s side.
Udhau, good fortune's come our way today:
These eyes of yours that looked on Syam have met our gaze!
Like lovelorn bees that scent the flowers in a wafting breeze
Our each and every limb lies steeped in blessèd bliss.
As a comely vision glimpsed in a mirror’s glass
Hari comes to us, Sur; and we forget our parting’s pain!
उस सौरंगी II

II राग धनाश्री II

अब मैं नाच्यो बहुत गुपाल।
काम क्रोध को पत्तिरि चोलना कंठ विपय की माल।
महामोह के नूपुर बाजल संद्रा सजल।
भ्रम भोयो मन भयो पक्षावज चलत असंगत चाल।
लुप्ता नाद करति घट भीतर नाना विन्धि उ है ताल।
माया को कटिंठा बाँध्यो लोम तिलक दियो भाल।
कोटिक कला काँचि दिखराई जल थन सुध नहि काल।
सूरदास की सबै अबिहा तूरि करो नेवलाल।॥ १६ ॥

Enough! I’ve danced too long, Gopal,
All clad in robes of lust and ire, and garlanded with carnal blooms.
My anklets of bewilderment ring out a scornful sound,
My muddled mind’s an errant drum whose rhythm’s lost its way.
Within my frame resound desires with many a jarring beat,
I’ve sashed my waist with fantasy and marked my brow with greed.
In putting on a hundred acts I heed nor place nor time;
Dispel all Sur’s deep ignorance, beloved son of Nand!
A folio from the earliest extant manuscript of the poems of Sūrdās. It was written in Fatehpur, Shekhawati (near Jaipur) in 1639 Vikram Samvat, equivalent to A.D. 1582 – during or shortly after Sūrdās’ own lifetime. (The title Sūrsāgar did not come into use until about a century later.)

The folio begins with the stanza that appears as # 7 in our Sūr Sorahī; the Jaipur manuscript attributes it to Rāga Bilāval, whereas the modern edition of the Sūrsāgar attributes it to Rāga Dhanāśrī.

The complete manuscript is published as पद सूरसागर का – the Padas of Surdas, ed. Gopal Narayan Bahura, Maharaja Sawai Man Singh II Museum, 1982, with an introduction by K.E. Bryant.
1. I’ve lost so many days paying Hari no heed – An introspective poem of humble supplication (vinaya) from the opening of the Śūrṣāgar: a confession of sensuality, and a profound regret for successive wasted births spent turned away from Hari (Krishna/Vishnu). Echoing earlier poets such as Kabīr, who delighted in persuading themselves and others of the need for a devotional life spent on a personal spiritual quest, it equates formal religion and its priesthood with the world of the senses (viṣaya), and seeks emancipation through divine grace.

2. Awake, young prince of Braj! For the day-lily blooms – This fine poem establishes the pastoral mood of Braj, showing Krishna’s iconic majesty in an idealised setting. The world is up and doing; young Krishna too is urged to stir himself. (A manuscript variant has the metrically superior jāgau for our jāgie.) ‘Lofty trees’ (banarāī, ‘forest-kings’) may reflect a poetic landscape rather than the geographical Braj; but the other details have an earthy authenticity as a rustic backdrop to the divine yet infant Krishna, ‘who bears a lotus in his hand’. The word tamaracu (‘cockerel’) derives from Sanskrit tāmaracūḍa ‘red-crest’, but also brilliantly suggests ‘darkness-destroyer’ – the rooster heralding the dawn.

3. Awake, awake, my son Gopal! – Mother Yashoda tries a new tactic in her attempts to rouse her sleeping son: she says it’s simply not done to sleep so much through the blessed hour of dawn. She adopts the impersonal passive voice in her words nahīna itau soiyata (Hindi itnā nahī soyā jītā), naively hoping that an appeal to normative behaviour might save the day. The poet then brings a new twist to an old image: Krishna’s ‘lotus face’ has not yet bloomed (i.e. his sleepy eyes refuse to open), and the other gopis’ sons who want to play their morning games with him are like bees who come buzzing around him but have to return home disappointed.

4. Hari’s singing softly to himself in the courtyard – A portrait of the young Krishna blithely amusing himself at home. The whimsy of childhood – singing a tune, trying out a little dance – contrasts with his cosmic persona, for the ‘raised arm’ that beckons the cows is the very one that held aloft Govardhan hill; the adjective kājarī ‘black’ can be read with both the ‘arm’ and the ‘cow’. Similarly the cowherd’s rustic home is simultaneously a palace with mirrored columns, reflecting the epiphany of Krishna as god in human form.

5. Syam went to the door of that cowherd girl – In this favorite ‘butter-thief’ trope, the poem plays masterfully with the paradox of the young child’s divinity: his not-so-innocent games, his butter-stealing, and his talking to his own reflection (naturally, the world reflects him!); these are all actions that demonstrate Krishna’s lilā, his joyful sport in the mundane world of mankind. Sweetness of mood runs hand in hand with intimations of divine immanence. The poem closes with a final irony as the ‘slayer of the demon Mura’ flees timidly from the ‘angry’ gopi.
6. Syam, what do you crave as you roam about? – The gopi knows very well the answer to her own suggestive question, as do we, the readers. Krishna, caught red-handed, ever plays the innocent: ‘I thought this was my house’, again with delicious irony. Did he extract the ant for the good of the milk or to save the insect? The genius of poetry is that we need not decide, but can let both causes play simultaneously in our minds. The reader of the original is again given executive powers in the final line, where we have linked the two clauses by the conjunction ‘but’: the Braj text has no equivalent to this word, merely setting the statements alongside each other in an asyndeton, leaving the reader to resolve their connection as ‘but’ or ‘and’, each with its own set of implications.

7. Gopal is eating butter on the sly! – One gopi tells another about Krishna’s butter-thieving. This theme often uses a trope of ‘concealment’, and here the speaker advises her friend to watch Krishna’s līlā from a hiding place. The poet positions the phrase oṭa ṭhāṭhe ḍhvai amidships, allowing it to qualify either uṭhi avolōki or jihi bidhi ḍhvai lakhi leta: is it the gopi or Krishna who is hiding? And who is the guilty party: Krishna as the thief of butter, or the gopi as the thief of surreptitious visions? With such ambiguities and open-ended resonances, the poet charms our minds.

8. What is he like, this Kanhai, this son of Nand? – Young Radha’s intense curiosity about Krishna is wonderfully expressed in her questions to a friend, with the interrogatives kaise and kaisēhũ echoed by ‘k’ alliterations in every speech line: kanhāī, kabahū, sakucati, ika, kahati, unakāti, kahiyata, mokāũ. Notice how Radha refers to Krishna with not one name but two, nādasuvana kanhāī, taking care to identify him correctly: she barely knows him and must not end up with the wrong ‘Kanhai’, the wrong ‘son of Nanda’! The friend is understandably ‘confused’ by Radha’s words, which skip and dance around with all the incoherent excitement of young love.

9. Enquires dark Syam, “And who are you, fair girl?” – Krishna questions Radha with a self-confidence that reflects his Lord-of-Braj status, and Radha replies with the cautious disdain of a young girl rejecting bold advances, whether welcome or not. Name-references reinforce the playful tone: the question about Radha’s parentage hints at her proud patronymic vrṣabhānujā ‘daughter of Vrishabhanu’, while she reduces Krishna’s conventional lofty patronymics nandasuvana, nandakumāra (etc.) ‘son of Nanda’ to a down-to-earth nāda ḍхоṭā ‘Nanda’s lad’. The noun jorī anticipates their eventual union, and the seemingly innocent khelana ‘playing’ hints at the love-games to come.

10. Vrishabhanu’s daughter sets off home – Radha’s disdainful tone is maintained here as she feigns indifference to the prospect of visiting Krishna. The poet’s skill in depicting homely domesticity articulates a timeless moment of family life: a mother is wisely anxious about a young daughter out with her girl-friends. When heart, mind and spoken words all have different priorities, Radha has recourse to careful dissimulation: why, of course she had not been hanging around the riverbank near Krishna’s home, she’d just slipped out to the cowpen (kharika, in metathesis for khiraka) to check the cows…

॥ सूर सोरहः ॥
11. *She sets off home with gladdened mind* – When a *sakhī* meets Radha on the path, Radha’s thoughtful expression, slow gait, and weighed-down-with-love appearance all betray the fact that she is returning from a tryst. In the last couplet, the *sakhī* tells Radha (and us) what she (and we) already know: that the longed-for lovemaking in a lush verdant grove has at last been achieved. The image of a *kuñja bhavana* ‘arbours house’ is a powerful oxymoron that combines the bucolic appeal of ‘the wild’ with the luxurious comforts of home! This happy situation gives Krishna a new and distinctly vernacular epithet: as *sugandha curāvanahārau*, ‘stealer of fragrances’, he (the greedy honey-bee craving nectar) has taken what he wanted. But the second line tells us that fair Radha, too, has done her fair share of ‘looting’ in the grove.

12. *Gokul’s lord adorns the swing* – The swing suggests simple bucolic pleasures, but here (as in the jewelled, mirrored pillars of Krishna’s village home that we encountered in # 4) it reflects a divine majesty: its golden seat is decorated with jewels, while the enthroned hero and heroine bear grand epithets. As the gopis push the swing, the glowing visual image is matched by the sweet sound of laughter and loving talk, with the penultimate line being dominated by a delicate trickle of verb participles, *khelatĩ hāsati...gāvatĩ bolatĩ*. Sur shows Radha’s status by celebrating the pair *piya pyārī* ‘lover and beloved’ (and not just Krishna himself) as his joint *svāmi*.

13. *Though autumn’s here, still Syam’s not come.* – The bittersweet feeling of *viraha*, the pain of ‘love in separation’, rapidly converts remembered romantic backdrops into painful symbols of past happiness. The luscious abundance of nature provides many a simile for passionate love-making, but when the lover is far away and the bed is cold, the poor beloved has nothing left but a sea of memories, an uncrossable ocean of lovesickness. Luxuriant grasses taller than a man (google ‘kans grass’ for the *kāśa kusumita* image) once offered a concealed trysting place in a beautiful landscape whose pools and ponds brimmed with lotuses….but Krishna’s attentions are now on some other beauty, some rival belle, and all hope is gone.

14. *This is no season, please, for angry pride* – The *sakhī* confidante reasons with a sulking Radha, who has been angered by some real or imagined transgression on the part of Krishna, and urges her to give in to the lush sensuality of the monsoon and go to him. Her display of jealous anger, is ‘unseasonal’ and she she will surely yield to the mood of the moment: when nature is so impetuous and rapturous, why should she hold back? The key Braj verb in the opening line is *rūs-* (*rūśibau*, here oblique as *rūśibe*), replaced in modern Hindi by its cognate *rūṭh-* (*rūṭhnā*).

15. *Udhau, good fortune’s come our way today.* – Similes and metaphors are instructional strategies, meant to help deliver meaning: and here the lovelorn gopis, missing Krishna, turn them on the pedagogue Udhau whose theology sees Krishna as an omnipresent abstraction. This encounter crystallizes the age-old rivalry between two different perceptions of the divine as either *saguṇa* or *nirguṇa* – respectively ‘with qualities’ (in the sense of an iconic, anthropomorphemic narrative presence in the world) or ‘without’ them. The message of
transcendental unity is stood on its head when the messenger, Udhaú himself, becomes the very medium through which the gopis’ vision of the physical Krishna is even brighter than before: Udhaú’s eyes, which lately had darśan of Krishna, now meet the eyes of the gopis!

16. Enough! I’ve danced too long, Gopal. One of the Śūrṣāgar poems probably attributable to Sūrdās himself, this vivid and unsettling text is deservedly well known. Each couplet contributes to a single metaphor, building the image of a dancer who flaunts himself in a blur of frivolous sensuality and exhibitionism. Our reading māṁ nācyau may be a ‘modernizing’ change from an earlier reading, haũ nācyau: in the older layers of Braj poetry, māṁ is used exclusively in the ergative tense, i.e. as an equivalent to modern Hindi māne – see māṁ ati sukha pāyau in # 4. But such pedantic observations only go to prove Sūr’s point: that we all dance our own dance, and are all in dire need of divine intervention.

— ON TRANSLATION —

While translating these verses from the Śūrṣāgar, we have borne the following issues in mind:

**Structure.** These padaś are lyrics, meant for singing, and were composed within an oral tradition; they typically have a short first line (called ṭek ‘prop’, or sthāyi ‘fixed [line]’) that acts as a frequently-repeated chorus. The question arises, therefore, of whether a translation should find a way of reflecting this performative aspect. In her beautiful Śūrṣāgar renderings, French translator Charlotte Vaudeville suggests it graphically by setting the first line apart from the main text, with a repeat at the end. An equivalent practice with our translations would look like this (Śūr Sorahi # 1):

I've lost so many days paying Hari no heed
Relishing sweet slurs on my fellows in life after wasted life.
I’ve anointed my desires with oil, rubbed my clothes spotless,
And gone about as a swami, tilak on brow, seeking the sensual.
Fearsome Time makes the whole world tremble and the great gods weep:
What then of wretched Sur, who would fill his belly and lie down to sleep?
I've lost so many days paying Hari no heed

Though we experimented with this reflection of performance practice, we eventually rejected such a layout, because although the padaś are singable, many also boast a sophisticated literary structure that builds steadily throughout the stanza, often leading to a sense of both climax and closure in the final couplet. A distinct narrative logic of this kind seems best served by a straightforward linear structure. The formality of couplet structure, disrupted by the above-and-below positioning of the first line à la Vaudeville, is also at stake here. There is a tension between the circularity of the ‘song’ and the linear development of the ‘poem’.
**Concision.** English can rarely achieve the crisp economy of Braj verse, but we have emulated it as closely as possible, translating each Braj line with a single line in English. We prize this element of faithfulness to the original because concision is fundamental to the allusiveness, open-endedness, rhetoric, and minimalism of the poems. The challenge is to curtail the use of words such as pronouns, articles, and auxiliaries that not only tend to choke the English sentence but also – critically – replace multivalency with specific closed meanings. The problem is partly a technical one: Hindi and her sisters are ‘pro-drop’ languages, but English is not!

**Allusiveness and ellipsis.** Many words and phrases in the Braj poems work as little detonators of meaning in the reader’s imagination: allusive images hint at complementary senses alongside the primary ones, and ellipses allow the reader to enter the process of interpretation as an active participant. The poems are like pencil sketches, rather than full-blown paintings: much lies between the lines, and as translators we have avoided colouring in the detail – a function better suited to the commentator. In poetry, less is more; and while *elucidation* is helpful in transporting meaning across the bridge of space and time, full *explication* runs the risk of reducing the poems to mere narratives.

**Couplet composition.** While the syntactic unit of a typical Sūrśāgar poem is the individual line, the semantic unit is the individual *couplet*. In the Braj originals, this structure is traditionally marked by the single and double *danda* at the end of odd and even lines respectively, and we reflect this structure in our translations, through syntax and/or through various punctuation strategies. Couplet cohesion is often cemented by couplet rhyme in the originals, but we have used rhyme very sparingly because end-stopped rhyme tends to bring an unwelcome sense of ‘closedness’ and literalness to the English. (A hunt for rhymes often tempts the English translator towards inversions that make the poetic diction sound precious and contrived: an inverted ‘her laughter sweet’ offers more rhyme options than ‘her sweet laughter’, but comes at a price.)

**Register.** The Sūrśāgar features a finely balanced lexicon that portrays the sweet domesticity of Krishna’s childhood while avoiding mundane banality; this gives the language a timeless quality, and we have tried to emulate this in our translations by avoiding both outright archaism and the anachronism of explicitly contemporary English. We find that lexical extremes are especially to be avoided: manifestly Latinate words can seem out of place in a translated vernacular *pada* (even as equivalents for Sanskritic words), while on the other hand very casual language would erode the essential dignity of the Braj diction. We have therefore aimed at a balanced register that avoids the extremes of both formality and informality.

**Rhythm.** Rhythm is the heart of the matter, and its soul also. The phrase ‘enquires dark Syam’ (# 9) avoids the awkward sequence of three stressed syllables (and sibilant inelegance) that would come with the not-quite-synonymous ‘Asks dark Syam’. We have welcomed certain rhythmic sequences and cadences that turned up more or less uninvited, as in the iambic ‘Awake, young prince of Braj!’ (# 2), but have not imposed it throughout whole lines.
or stanzas. When such a rhythm does dominate a full line, it may easily seem overdone: ‘Your father’s name? And where’s your home? I haven’t seen you in our lane’ (# 9) may be an example. Rhythm supports meaning, and verse rhythm helps compensate for the clear and explicit transitions of prose.

Epithets. Krishna/Vishnu’s ‘thousand names’ (sahasranāma) give poets abundant choice in matching epithet to context; and each example is a new challenge to the translator. We have sometimes brought out the meaning of a name by adding an adjective, rendering syāma as ‘dark Syam’, or by translating a patronymic, rendering nandakumāra as ‘Nanda’s son’; on one occasion, Sanskrit patronymics are teasingly contrasted by a distinctly vernacular nāda dhoṭā (# 9), which we have matched with an equally breezy ‘Nanda’s lad’. In # 5, the lofty epithet muraśri, ‘enemy of [the demon] Mura’, stands as a wonderfully ironic foil to the child Krishna’s timidity, but since the actual narrative about Mura is not involved here, we render the epithet with a superordinate, ‘demon-slayer’, highlighting the irony at the expense of the demon himself. In short, we deal with epithets pragmatically, on a case-by-case basis!

Landscape. Like manuscript illuminations and other paintings depicting devotional scenes, the Śūrsāgar combines a divine vision with an idealised yet realistic landscape whose topography, trees, flowers, creatures, and seasons all reflect the actual natural world; the devotional and theological significance of this is truly profound. To quote Margaret Moore’s famous dictum about poetry itself, poems visualize ‘imaginary gardens with real toads in them’. Translations, too, must maintain this vision of a mythic landscape grounded in natural actuality.

Untranslatables. A few words lacking English equivalents may best be left untranslated: would-be translations such as ‘forehead mark’ fail to convey what a tilak is; and terms such as ‘milkmaid’ summon up images from Vermeer paintings or Staffordshire pottery rather than the utterly different ‘gopi’ in her Braj landscape. The portentous Sanskrit word kāla can hardly be captured by mere ‘time’; but here we have resorted to the secret weapon of the roman script – its distinction of upper and lower cases – and spelt the word as ‘Time’.

We have taken a few short-cuts in the dairy department: dahī (variously named in Braj texts) is not exactly ‘curd’, but the Turkish-derived ‘yoghurt’ has too alien a taste in this context. The numerous varieties of ‘lotus’ are, sadly, undistinguished in English, though reference can be made to their differing colours and opening & closing times; a poetic if botanically imprecise rendering as ‘lily’ injects variety and soft alliteration, allows an economic plural without needing an extra syllable (trisyllabic ‘lotuses’ does not exactly trip off the tongue), and avoids the exotic ‘lotus-eater’ image beloved to the Greeks and to Tennyson and friends.

The greatest challenges to the translator often come in the simplest packages. In # 5, the butter-thief is feeding his own reflection in a mirrored pillar. When the reflection drops the offered butter, Krishna says kā raṅga, which we have half-heartedly translated as ‘What’s up?’. The multiple allusions of Krishna’s two-word question (vernacular kā = Hindi kyā; Sanskritic raṅga ‘beauty, style, mood, acting, drama, game, love…’) reach to the very depths of the notion of līlā – or rather, to the heights of joy in the playful manifestation of the divine as a mischievous child delighting in his own play.
Substitutions. Translation involves substitution at numerous levels from the word to the idiom, and even beyond. The addition of the word ‘please’ in the first line of # 14 compensates for the prevailing tone of supplication with which a go-between urges her friend to the tryst; it is thus a substitution for an entire attitude typical of this genre in the Śūrśāgar.

Vision, mood, and meaning. Bhakti enjoys moods of ecstasy and humour and jubilation, but its essential quality is quietist – a profound stillness, ‘the peace of God that passeth all understanding’. We have tried to reproduce the irenic and beatific vision achieved by their authors, but just as the beautiful Sanskritic word mangala is only partially captured by such awkwardly technical renderings as ‘auspiciousness, propitiousness’, so too these poems, with their congruity of immanence and transcendence, resist full translation in European languages. The Śūrśāgar depicts a sublime pastoral that features divinity without lofty distance, dignity without pomposity, homeliness without banality, intimacy without prurience, and intense feeling without sentimentality. Translators must try to enter the sanctum of a poem and then report on how it feels to be there; but they can only hope to represent this ‘through a glass, darkly’.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


